TWO AMERICAN WELFARE MOTHERS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
NANCY SIRKIS

PRODUCED
BY SUSAN K. BERMAN

This is the story of Marie Ratagick and Frances Black, but it is also the story of most mothers who are on welfare. Welfare families are as different from each other as nonwelfare families are, but it almost doesn't matter whether the family is large or small, black or white, rural or urban: what, in fact, matters the most is what is the same. Their survival depends on welfare.

Because Marie Ratagick is white and has a small family, she represents the largest group of American welfare mothers—contrary to the myth. Because Frances Black is black and has a large family, she represents the "stereotype"—and her years of caring and hard work show just how inaccurate the stereotype is.

Together, they are all the mothers of young children, on welfare or not, who have the responsibility as heads of household—without even the earning power that white male single parents might have. Without child care, equal pay, or savings, without a man who is willing and able to help support the family, almost any mother in America might end up on welfare: in the past year alone, a million and a half more women and dependent children have been forced to do just that.

Now or soon, the story we read may be our own.

MARIE RATAGICK

Marie Ratagick was born on July 4, 1939, in New Orleans. Before the Civil War, her family had owned a plantation and slaves, but Marie and her family had long since grown used to life in a city slum. When she was 13, they moved to Alabama where her father opened a small laundry. For five years, she worked full time in that laundry while struggling to graduate from high school and a business course.

After marriage, she used those business skills to put her husband through two years of college. Then came four years of moving around the country while he pursued construction jobs, and she gave birth to their three children.

After moving to Atlanta, they were divorced. To supplement child support payments, Marie Ratagick took several secretarial jobs and worked as a paraprofessional trainer for a local branch of the Office of Economic Opportunity. She quit the OEO job, where aggressiveness and lack of a college degree were held against her as a woman employee, but continued to help organize household workers, welfare recipients, and other poor people.

When her former husband moved to Washington, D.C., Marie Ratagick moved the family there so he could have a role in raising the children. It was in Washington that she was finally forced to go on welfare, and that she began organizing with her sister welfare mothers in earnest.

Writing this story is, for Marie Ratagick, another way of organizing.

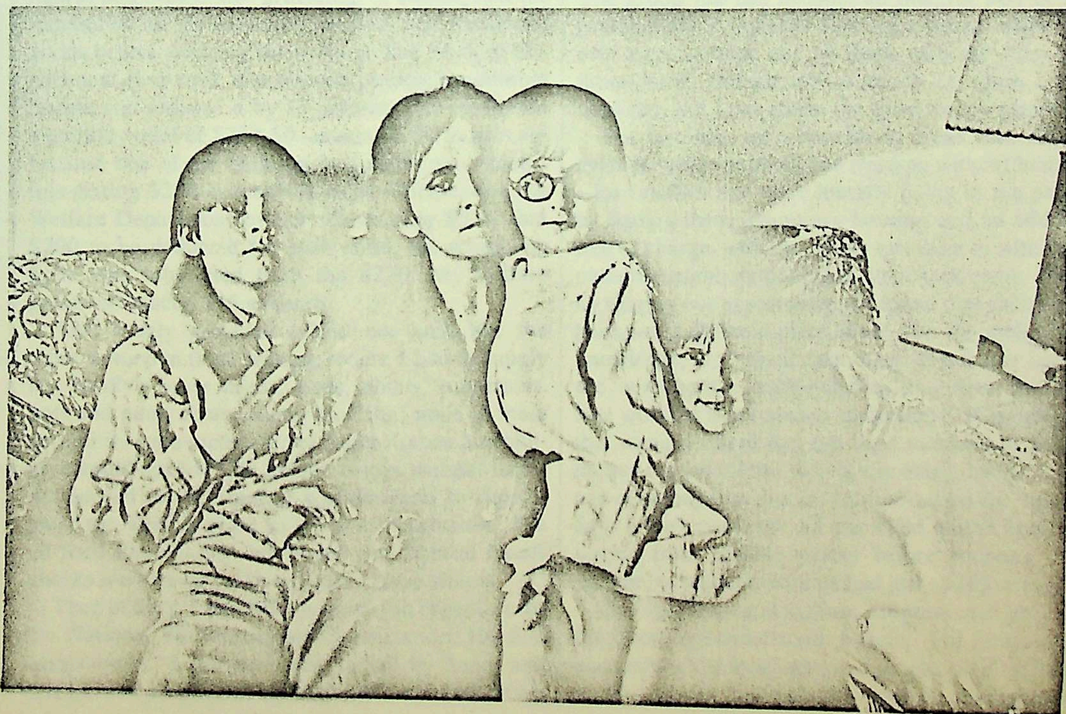
Like 60 percent of all the people on welfare in the United States, I am white. Like 20 percent of my sisters on welfare, I am a high school graduate. And like 75 percent of us, I have worked at jobs outside the home for most of my adult life. But low pay, long hours, and just passable child care are major problems for any woman with an outside job. (While I worked as a secretary, for instance, my children were left in understaffed day-care centers—a service that cost me 45 percent of my gross income.)

For those of us who are single parents, the problem is even worse. My children and I hardly knew each other until I went on welfare and began to work at home for them. Together, we now share the most basic problem of all. Survival.

When I first applied for welfare three years ago, the worst part was not knowing what to expect. I didn't know if I was eligible at all, or which condition of my family's crisis might make me eligible. Because of my work in the South, I knew I should be able to get food stamps and Medicaid, but I didn't know how much of a welfare grant I had a right to ask for, or what I could do if the welfare worker refused to help me. Making the decision to open your life to investigation adds to a feeling of insecurity. If we weren't forced into it, most of us would never apply for assistance.

My decision was forced on me by a housing crisis. It was February, 1970, and I had just been evicted. No realty company would rent to me with three children and without a full-time job. Since I wasn't on welfare, I couldn't rent anything from the slumlords who usually specialized in welfare recipients. Finally, I went to various government offices for help. I didn't know I was entitled to bus tokens (and no welfare worker ever offered them), so I walked to each of many welfare offices with my five-year-old daughter.

In those rooms filled with other defenseless people, I watched the great bureaucratic machine grinding away without feeling. At 6 A.M. the line forms outside; at 8 the receptionist starts the daily appointment list. Workers drift in; by 8:45 the first client is having a preliminary interview. Coffee breaks at 9:30 slow up the schedule even more, and at 10 the appointment list is closed. Everyone now in the office is supposed to be seen by 3:30, but by about 11:30 workers start drifting out to lunch (with no announcement of that fact), and the rest of the clients are left to wait until after one o'clock. At 3:30 the workers stop



interviewing so they can finalize their report forms. (All the clients who have been waiting are told to return by 6 A.M. the next day.)

After five trips to such offices, I began to understand why people want to break the system that screws mothers and children financially, emotionally, systematically, daily. Literally, the mother-fucking system. And that understanding became deeper as I began to get answers to my questions.

I could receive *no* payment, *no* food stamps, and *no* Medicaid--all because I had *no* permanent address. Yes, there was a program called "Emergency Assistance" designed to help families in such crises, but it would pay the first month's rent or security deposit on an apartment only if I had a full-time job —or was already on welfare. Later, I found out that other mothers and children without housing or income were reduced to sleeping in Rock Creek Park. My family was saved from despair at the very last minute: I found a building run by two old women who were drinking away their loneliness and forgot to ask me for references. I got the apartment.

When I was finally awarded my welfare payment, it was "85 percent of need." That meant that several men, working in the sterile environment of the District of Columbia Budget Office, had composed a budget representing 100 percent of the amount a family of four would have needed to live at the lowest possible level in 1967, when the last government figures had been done—providing, of course, that the family had all the necessary personal and household goods before applying for welfare. The Welfare Department then took that already outdated minimum budget and reduced it by 15 percent. The result was a monthly total of $238.50—minus $8.50 in my case because one of my children was under six. Since I was getting $200 a month in child support, and the Welfare Department by law allows only $5 of that $200 to be deducted for each child, the remaining $185 was subtracted from the $230. My welfare grant was exactly $45 a month.

That barely provided subsistence and, like the other women in those waiting rooms, I had to supply my family's other needs. Beds, chairs, mattresses, pots and pans, shoes, winter clothing: none of these necessities were included, yet many women and children could not live like human beings without them. A "Special Needs" budget was designed to supplement the welfare grant in cases of deprivation. We all tried individually, but found that Special Needs checks were *never* given to relieve these strains.

Then in May, I met Bill Pastreich, an organizer for the National Welfare Rights Organization. His first words were, "I can have you in jail by June, and furniture in your house by July." The first half of his promise came true on June 23, 1970. Together with Deborah Smith, another welfare mother, I helped to knock on doors, hold meetings with families desperate for furniture and other "special needs," and register 150 appointment requests with the Director of Public Welfare—all for June 23. By the time we kept these appointments, there were 2,000 welfare mothers who rallied outside in our support.

The director barricaded her doors against us, though when she did meet with us, she cried—out of fear, sympathy, or helplessness. Two of us were beaten by the police and went to jail on that day, charged with unlawful entry into the offices that had been built for us. It was the first of many times I was beaten for protesting inequities in the welfare system.

Negotiations for "Special Needs" continued through six months and a score of broken promises. In my case, the furniture never came. (To complete the cycle of repression, the District of Columbia initiated a flat grant system in the fall of 1972, thus eliminating the Special Needs category altogether.) But we now had ties with other women all over the city, and those of us who lived close to each other became neighborhood survival units. We gained not furniture, but each other.

Now, I can't talk about my life without talking about Deborah Smith and Jackie Chapman and Hope Graham and Mary Flowers; about all the women in the Mount Pleasant Welfare Rights Organization. The group life has become an integral part of my personal life. I wouldn't dare see a worker about my own case without one of them with me (I'm still intimidated, though not as much as when I first applied), but I can storm the gates for my sisters.

For instance, we were able to break that vicious cycle for other mothers and children without housing —for families that were literally living in the park— by finding them temporary housing and an address, free of charge, with our group members or with sympathetic neighbors until that first check came. Then, by sharing our experiences, we found that each member knew a different piece of the law. By pooling our knowledge, we helped each other to lose our fear of the bureaucratic multisyllables that even the welfare workers don't always understand. It turned out that some children had not been included in grants, money for school bus tickets was being denied, retroactive money was due us, transportation for medical help wasn't paid, the $5 per child hadn't been deducted from outside money before counting it as income, or welfare workers had just added wrong.

The supplemental welfare program was probably the most misunderstood benefit. For instance, a woman worked four hours a night cleaning offices for $1.65 an hour, but when she reported it honestly, the

worker said, "Well, now that you've got a job, I guess you'll be getting off welfare, won't you?" Because the woman didn't know her right to supplemental welfare, she didn't protest—and later on, the worker said, "You told me to take you off welfare." That's what makes women lie about the pittance they earn, and then be subject to fines and even jail sentences as "welfare cheaters."

Together, we found out that 50 percent of us weren't getting all the benefits we were entitled to. And together, we started to demand our rights.

Then we took all the information we'd learned from our sisters—plus some from our major legal resource, Ed Schwab, a Legal Services lawyer who used to work for the Welfare Department—and we put together leaflets and flyers. We distributed them, and held workshops to teach other welfare clients what we'd learned: that the first step in breaking the cycle of destruction is to understand the law; and the second step is either to use that law or oppose it.

One way of using the law is to ask for a hearing. Government agencies must provide them, and when you're right, they may give in quickly. A hearing costs the client nothing, but for the agency, it means calling in the offending worker, a court reporter, a hearing officer (usually a top agency official), and the agency lawyer. They're tied up for a half a day or more, so it's expensive. One of the major reasons women and children of my neighborhood, and of all the National Welfare Rights Organization, lobbied against Nixon's Family Assistance Program was that it would have greatly curtailed a client's hearing rights. And no government agency can work unless all the participants have those rights.

Even when you don't know what your rights are, or what the decision might be, it's important to ask for a hearing. Ask first and think later. For instance, the epileptic and widowed mother of a seven-year-old girl was told that, if the daughter was removed from the welfare rolls by getting her dead father's veteran's benefits, then the mother would lose her benefits because she would cease to be the mother of a dependent child. During the hearing, it turned out that mother and child were entitled to a combination of disability payment, Social Security, and veteran's benefits that amounted to considerably more than they had been getting before the problem came up—yet we never would have known that if we hadn't asked for a hearing. Just listening to the hearings themselves is a good way of learning about the law.

Of course, we don't always win. For instance, one of our members overheard a white male caseworker sexually propositioning her 17-year-old daughter; he assured her he'd get them on welfare if she'd go to bed with him. We asked *(continued on page 112)*

resses, teachers, unemployed people, and welfare workers, too—to organize around the economic issues that affect us most. I don't believe people in the Welfare Department go to work every day with the intention of hurting people. Some white women may go into social work as a way of "improving" people—and end by making others meet the predetermined cultural standard they themselves were forced to meet. Some black women see social work as a way of helping poor black people—but may become hardened by the sorrow and need they see, or come to feel used or deceived by the clients. Men control the upper-management levels within the Welfare Department, and they will never see child care and housework as real work—until we change the definitions. We need special interest groups, but with coalitions of mutual support.

The important thing is this: wherever you are, you can make change happen. Sue Clark, a sociology professor at Georgetown University, understands the value of our organizing work and pays us for lecturing to her classes each term. That allows us to earn money for the "extras" (laundry, school expenses, clinic transportation) that welfare doesn't include. Father Wendt at St. Stephen's Church runs free food programs, distributes used clothing, and lets homeless families sleep in the church. Even people who are just at home with their children can teach them that all human work is valuable, and help them not to be brainwashed into believing that money and material goods are a measure of personal worth.

I feel that the organizing work I'm doing is very valuable, even though I'm not valued by society as much as I was when I was doing less important work as a secretary or for OEO. Right now, in addition to helping welfare clients, I'm working with the Movement for Economic Justice, a new coalition (1609 Connecticut Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C.) which has organized clinics on taxpayers' rights.

We in the Women's Movement have realized that welfare is a woman's issue. That realization was forced on us because 85 percent of the welfare recipients in the country are women and dependent children, but only now are we beginning to see the fundamental power system that oppresses women most—but also oppresses others.

Bands of guerrilla fighters are successful because they know their terrain. To succeed, we must use our particular jobs and knowledge to the fullest. We must become nonviolent guerrillas who unite to build a movement for economic justice.

So what began as a group of desperate, lonely welfare mothers has grown to a sisterhood. And now we're reaching out to all those who want their simple human rights.

—Marie Ratagick

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for a hearing and also held a press conference—after which the Welfare Department suddenly delivered beds that the mother's doctor had requested eight months before. Then they asked the mother to withdraw her complaint. When she refused, they got the 17-year-old to sign a statement against her mother by telling the teen-ager she'd be sent to a juvenile home if she didn't. The caseworker involved was commended for his "admirable" work and given a raise. We took court action to force the Department to hold a hearing—nine months after the original request. It was four months after that before we got the verdict from the Director of Public Welfare: the Department couldn't be held responsible for the criminal actions of its workers. The caseworker was transferred to Investigations and Collections.

None of this is terribly surprising. We've all had workers tell us that we should get married and get off welfare; or they'll say, "You're a nice-looking woman. Why don't you get a man to give you money instead?" Surely, many of us do relate to men, but only 12 percent of the fathers of children now on welfare have finished high school. What jobs can they get that allow them to support families? The Welfare Department tries to turn women's feelings against the poor male people in our lives by insisting that, unless we take action against the fathers of our children, we can't receive welfare. Recently, our group found out that workers had no legal right to demand that information—which can sometimes jeopardize a man's chance of getting a job. Besides, women who are heads of households should have the right to support their families in dignity—without prostitution by marriage or other bought-and-paid-for relationships with men. The male people in our lives should never be part of our hustle to survive.

And we do hustle—to save money, or to find jobs where we can earn money without leaving our children for too long. We collate papers at home for businessmen, or cater lunches, or even sell our blood for extra money. And we've all become passable repairwomen.

We work as a group—not just to survive, but to change the system itself. Every time welfare mothers demonstrate, hold a press conference, demand a hearing, or get a few minutes on a TV talk show, we're reminding everyone that we're people, not just computerized numbers. People begin to question: Why would mothers choose to go to jail rather than go home? Is it possible their homes are less comfortable than jails? Why is it necessary to hire guards with guns to control hungry people?

We must act as whatever we are—secretaries, waitresses, teachers, unemployed people, and welfare workers, too—to organize around the economic issues that affect us most. I don't believe people in the Welfare Department go to work every day with the intention of hurting people. Some white women may go into social work as a way of "improving" people—and end by making others meet the predetermined cultural standard they themselves were forced to meet. Some black women see social work as a way of helping poor black people—but may become hardened by the sorrow and need they see, or come to feel used or deceived by the clients. Men control the upper-management levels within the Welfare Department, and they will never see child care and housework as real work—until we change the definitions. We need special interest groups, but with coalitions of mutual support.

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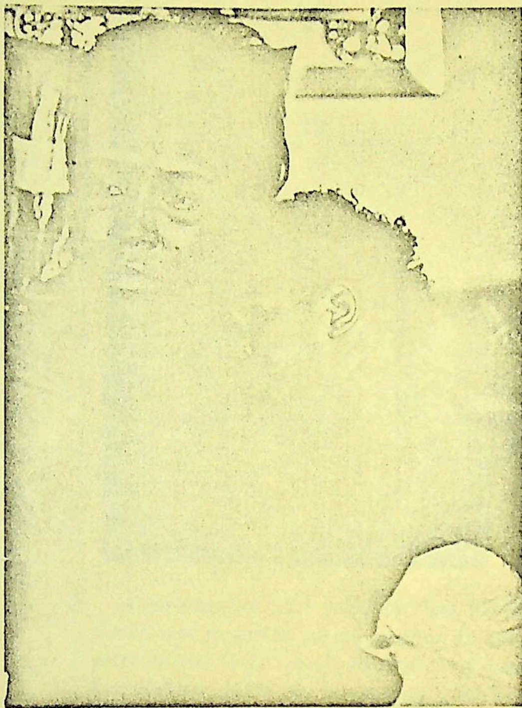
FRANCES BLACK

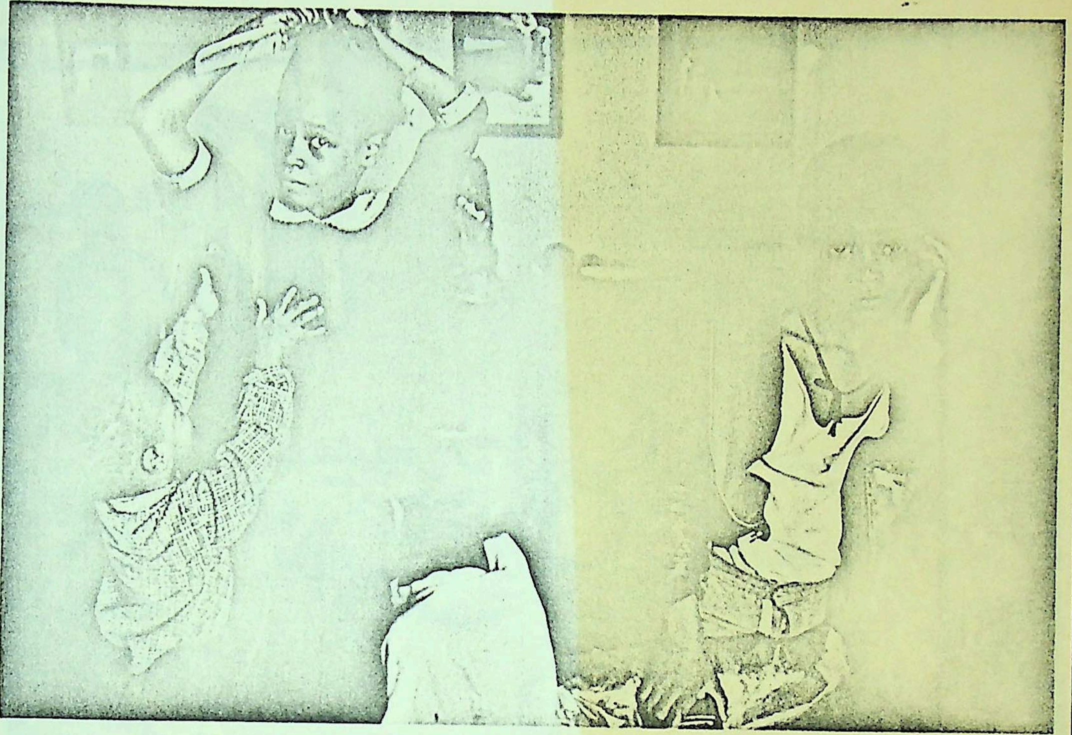


Frances Black was born in Screven, Georgia, on February 6, 1937. Her childhood was spent in Tillman, South Carolina, where she was raised by an aunt, Lillie Mae, whom she still refers to as her mother. Frances Black's education was interrupted in the ninth grade by her marriage to a lumber worker. When she was 19, they separated. Frances Black left her four daughters with relatives while she traveled alone to New York City to look for work.

In the past 17 years she has had a series of jobs, from live-in maid to long-distance telephone operator; but bad pay, worry about her children, inadequate child care, and discrimination have doomed her efforts from the start. During these many years, she has also had more children. They make all the problems of food and shelter more difficult, yet they are her life, her treasured and only form of wealth.

The younger children spend weekdays in a children's shelter in Staten Island and weekends at home. Another child, La Frances, was brain-damaged at birth and is in an institution.

The following photos and conversations span the years from 1969 to the present. Portions of *One Family*, by Nancy Sirkis (with an introduction by Julian Bond), have been adapted with permission from Little, Brown & Company, © 1970 by Nancy Sirkis.



After her first four years in New York, Frances Black was forced to go on welfare. In spite of constant efforts to get work, to find child care, to save her children from the harassment that their school and neighborhood reserve for welfare kids, she has spent most of the past 13 years existing on and struggling with the welfare system.

That is what Frances Black's life is like on paper. Only she can tell us what it's like to live that life.

Being on welfare is a new thing. I've always worked. When I was growing up in the South, I worked in my mother's boardinghouse. I did everything: washed dishes, ironed clothes, served the lodgers, cleaned the whole house, fed the chickens and the hogs, and still went to school.

It was hard, and I worked like hell, but I didn't mind—I was never hungry. I loved my mother so much. And my father. They'd take me everywhere—everywhere they went. We were always going to church, and my father and I sang duets in the choir. But then my father died, and my mother gave it all up.

So I always worked. Until I got married. Then we separated and I came here.

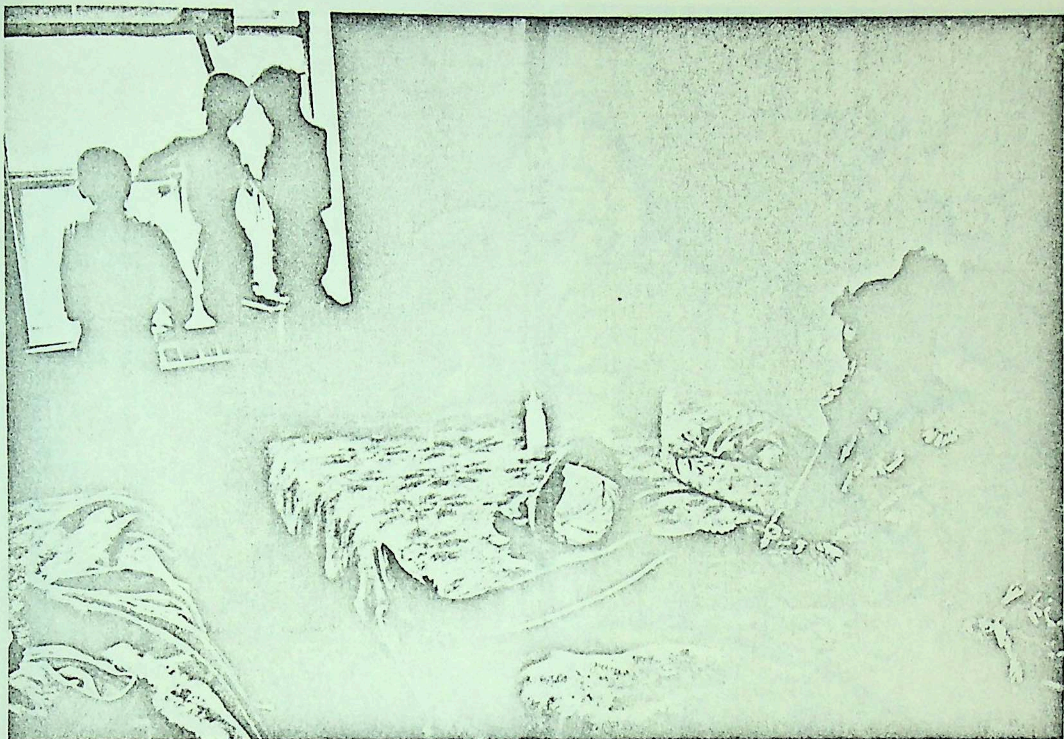
For the past few years I've worked, off and on, for the telephone company. I work the night shift so I can be home during the day with the children. But I'm not always able to do that—they get sick, or I get sick, and then I can't work.

Where I was born there weren't so many people. It wasn't like this. It was easier raising the children down South. Here, it's very hard to keep the children in the house, because what's going on outside is temptation. I have nothing here that attracts the children, that makes them stay at home.

Sometimes some of the other kids around take money from them, and beat them up. Michelle almost cried to keep from going down there one time. I guess they're all bad, mine and everybody else's. I don't know—I think it's easier to be bad than to be good. Kim was almost raped [in 1969, when she was 11]. She ran out, and we went to catch who did it. She came in with her hair all up over her head, and her heart was beating fast. She was crying.

I want them to look nice. I think it's a natural thing for kids to look nice. I want whatever they've got to be clean.

When you're on welfare, you're always somewhat different because you're getting public assistance. Read what it really says on the back of those checks. [The following is printed on the back of welfare checks: "By endorsing or cashing this check I state that I and members of my family whose support is included in this check are destitute and still in need



of public assistance. . . ."] I don't know how other people are being treated. I can only say what I'm going through. I don't know what's happening to everybody. I'm telling you what's happening to me and my children.

I was living in a small apartment in 1969. Living there was too hard for me, and I had to move. The mice. The place was infested with all kinds of pests. I was bitten by a mouse, and two of them were on the baby. And I had to kick one off because it was just eating away, gnawing away on my feet.

I went down to Housing [the city's Housing Administration]. I went down several years before they sent for me, but I didn't get any help. They finally sent a letter, not exactly stating that I was ineligible, but it all meant the same thing—"I'm sorry that the composition of your family doesn't stand up to our rules and regulations." I went downtown to demonstrate. There were different organizations, and all our children. We were on TV, radio, and the news. At the time I was pregnant with La Frances. Well, we just sat there. We stayed there for hours. Finally, after the demonstration, arrangements were made, and I moved here. But I don't like it much now, because of the incidents against us. Because of the demonstration, the publicity. Once you're publicized, and you still live in the same place, it's bad for you and your children. Everybody knows you. The children here tease my children. They can't go down and play. The other children say, "No more rats from Mrs. Black." They've beaten them up in the elevator. Some people —I don't know who—even broke my door; they broke the latch and set fire to things outside my door. First it started during the day with somebody banging the door. Then it was during the night. Once your kids get picked out, they're always getting something done to them. No, you wouldn't understand because it's not happening to you. All I know is what's happening to me.

Even the poorest look down on you. It would be nice if I could work and make enough money for these children. If *you* send your kids out in torn clothes or jeans, people know you have other clothes at home. But if I do, they know I don't have anything else. Sometimes the kids haven't had any clothes, so they couldn't go out.

If I feed the kids, there isn't money for clothes. They eat vegetables every day. But we eat a lot of starchy foods. We get more canned goods than we do meat. They like cereal, but I'm not able to buy it every day. They use too much milk.

They [the Welfare Department] don't want us to have anything. To get simple things means a fight. I had a welfare investigator who promised me money for coats. It didn't come. I asked for money for fur-

niture. They said yes. Now they say no. I asked for money for a baby-sitter so I could go out and work. They say no.

One time I took all the children downtown and threatened to leave them there. Some caseworkers are very nasty. I've met many who gave me the things that I asked for; and some who saw what I really needed and still wouldn't give. They make you feel lower than you really feel. They know that you're destitute. If I don't have anything and you have to give me something all the time—that means the one who's giving is superior.

If the children don't have clothes, they stay home from school until I get some money. Then the attendance officer comes breathing down my neck. And the SPCC [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children]. Some of the children were in CRMD [Children of Retarded Mental Development] classes, and I was never notified. Because of the banging and the harassment [following the publicity after the demonstration], they couldn't sleep and couldn't go to school. And none of the kids like to go to school. The schools are like jails. The classrooms are locked. When the kids are inside, they're locked for "safety." When the kids are outside, they're locked so nobody can steal anything. There are iron gates in the hallway. And the other children in school tease them about being on welfare.

You know there's some that don't care a bit. Whether you have the don't-care attitude or whether you have the I-care attitude, you still don't get what you want. Care or not, you're still the same. You've still got no money. You've still got no food. So what's the difference if you care or don't care? I could be the poorest person in the world, but I still wouldn't want to sit and wait on welfare.

If I were off welfare, the children would like it much more. I love these little children. I love being with them, but still, it's good to work. I can't earn enough, it's impossible. They should give welfare as a supplement, so you can be over the poverty line. Not take away welfare money if you work and try to do better for your family. But I don't care if they lower the check. I'm still going to work. I feel much better when I work. [When she does work, her welfare check can be reduced in proportion to her earnings, and her total income can be less, not more.]

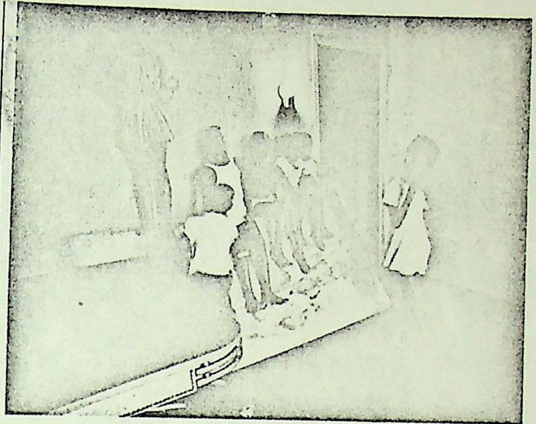
I've been to the Bureau of Child Welfare, Antipoverty, Welfare and Housing, to ask for another apartment to escape the harassment. They told me to place my children in institutions. I placed the ones who were most upset by the harassment—the four

youngest—at the shelter. Then I was sent to Community Psychiatry. They said I was paranoid because I complained of harassment.

There were two people who did try to help us. Miss Quirk at St. Luke's Community Psychiatry tried to get Housing to come to the hearings so I could get transferred out of this project during the time of harassment and trouble. And Mr. Poletro at the HRA [Human Resources Administration] helped me to put La Frances in a home for the retarded. He even came with me that day—took us there and helped me with that. Those two people, they were good, they helped me. But all those people and all those years, and those are the only two.

The whole system degrades you. If you're poor, you're bad. You're a bad mother. How am I doing? I'm doing pretty badly. Pretty badly. We're forced to live like this. We need food, we need clothes, we need furniture. And there's no way. There's just no way.

Why am I doing this, saying all this? The children didn't want me to, they don't like it—their pictures in a magazine where everybody can see them. The reason I'm doing it is not only for me. But for all mothers. We've got to change the system. Somebody has to do it. It doesn't matter how we look in the pictures or what people are going to think. If it's me, then it's me, and I only hope my children don't get hurt.



Nancy Sirkis is a photographer/painter and the author of four books. Susan K. Berman is an editor on the staff of "Ms."

Dear Mom
I was crying
for you
because I
miss you.
I wish of you.
I wish I was
home for
good. I don't
want to come
visit the
Mison
again
love corina
Black Greta
Black
Michael Black
Joe Black.

A letter written by Greta, Corina, Joseph and Michael Black to their mother. The "mission" is the shelter where the four children live during the week.