

# WHO ARE THE PEOPLE RECEIVING AID TO THE BLIND AND HOW MUCH ASSISTANCE ARE THEY RECEIVING?

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AT PRESENT in the 43 States administering programs for aid to the blind under the Social Security Act, 46,500 needy blind persons are receiving assistance payments amounting to more than \$1 million a month. Who are these people? How do they differ in age and race from the total blind population? How many of them are living in rural areas and how many in cities? How many of them were receiving or benefiting from any other type of aid before they were accepted for aid to the blind? How much assistance are they receiving individually, and what other income do they have? What are their living arrangements? How many are living in households which receive other forms of aid? How many are likely to go off the rolls because of improvement or restoration of sight or for other reasons?

Some light is shed on these and other questions by the social-data reports submitted by 42 States to the Social Security Board for the fiscal year 1938-39. The reports supply information on 11,200 persons accepted for aid to the blind and on 6,300 persons for whom aid was discontinued during that year.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief paper it is not possible to discuss differences in the characteristics of the needy blind in the several States or in the adequacy of the aid which they are receiving. In both these respects there are substantial differences among the States. These differences reflect fundamental variations in the characteristics of the blind population itself, in the eligibility requirements of State plans, in costs and standards of living, and in the willingness and ability of States to support programs for aid to the blind or other programs for the blind.

Despite its well-known inadequacies, the 1930 Federal census of the blind<sup>2</sup> affords a basis for some rough comparisons of the persons accepted

for aid to the blind with the total blind population. In age and race, the group of recipients of aid to the blind differs notably from the total blind population enumerated in 1930.

## Age

Under the Social Security Act needy blind persons of all ages are eligible for aid to the blind. In comparison with the census, however, there is marked underrepresentation on the assistance rolls of blind persons under 20 and over 65 years of age, with overrepresentation of those in the intervening years.

The underrepresentation of boys and girls in the program for aid to the blind may be explained at least in part by the fact that many blind children are cared for in schools for the blind, where they receive special instructions; under the Social Security Act, Federal funds may not be used for payments to residents of public institutions. Thirty States have established a minimum requirement for aid to the blind of 16, 17, 18, 21, or over 21 years of age. On the other hand, in three States—Connecticut, South Carolina, and North Carolina—9, 11, and 31 percent, respectively, of the persons accepted for aid to the blind in 1938-39 were under 21 years of age.

The prevalence of blindness is highest among aged persons. There are, however, two special types of public assistance for which the aged blind may be eligible—old-age assistance and aid to the blind. Many aged blind persons are receiving old-age assistance, and this is the principal reason for underrepresentation of persons 65 years of age and over in the program for aid to the blind. Only one State—Ohio—has established a maximum age for aid to the blind—65 years. Some other States, however, do not accept any applicants for aid to the blind who are eligible for old-age assistance, and in some instances aged blind persons whose blindness is attributed to senility are accepted only for old-age assistance. On the other hand, some States transfer persons from the aid to the blind program at age 65, if they are eligible for old-age assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> For information concerning recipients of aid to the blind accepted during the fiscal year 1937-38, see Lynch, John M., and Schumacher, Elizabeth S., "Recipients Accepted for Aid to the Blind in 1937-38," *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 2, No. 11 (November 1939), pp. 11-23.

<sup>2</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census, *The Blind and Deaf-Mutes in the United States*, 1930, p. 2.

These practices raise some interesting questions: Are aged blind persons transferred from aid to the blind to old-age assistance or accepted for old-age assistance in preference to aid to the blind because they can receive more adequate care under the old-age assistance program or because of limitations of funds available for aid to the blind? One State indicates that aged blind persons are given old-age assistance rather than aid to the blind in order to save the expense of eye examinations. In Massachusetts, which transfers eligible blind persons to old-age assistance at age 65, the maximum payment for aid to the blind is \$30, but there is no maximum for old-age assistance.

### *Race*

The prevalence of blindness is higher among Negroes than among white persons, according to the 1930 census of the blind. Blindness is, of course, frequently associated with low standards of nutrition and hygiene and lack of needed medical care, which are more common among Negroes than among whites. Of the persons accepted for aid to the blind in 1938-39, Negroes constituted 23 percent, whereas in 1930, in the same group of States, Negroes comprised 16 percent of the total blind population. From 50 to 70 percent of the persons added to the rolls in 1938-39 in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, and South Carolina were Negroes.

### *Residence*

In order to make provision for eye examinations, instruction at home or in school, and medical care to conserve or improve vision, it is important to know where applicants and recipients of aid to the blind are living and whether medical and educational facilities are accessible to them. Of the needy blind persons accepted for aid in 1938-39, 22 percent were living in large cities of 100,000 or more population, 29 percent were living in cities of from 2,500 to 100,000 population, 28 percent were living on farms, and 21 percent were living in rural areas but not on farms. In Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, 70 percent or more of all persons added to the rolls in 1938-39 were living in rural areas.

### *Previous Assistance*

About half the persons accepted for aid to the blind in 1938-39 were transferred to this program

from other welfare programs: 43 percent had received or benefited from some other type of aid within 30 days prior to investigation for aid to the blind, and an additional 7 percent within 2 years. The most common form of aid previously received was general relief; in some instances, however, the general relief may have been granted only pending determination of eligibility for aid to the blind. Negligible numbers of blind persons were shifted to the program from almshouses or other institutions. About half the persons accepted for aid to the blind either were newcomers to the welfare rolls or had not been on the rolls within 2 years.

### *Amounts of Assistance*

How much is the monthly assistance given to the blind, and how adequate is this assistance? We know the amount of the payments, but unfortunately we cannot give a satisfactory answer as to their adequacy. The amounts of assistance approved for the persons added to the rolls in 1938-39 ranged from \$1 to \$65 a month; half of the persons accepted were to receive between \$13 and \$30. The median payment was \$20. The level of payments varies enormously from State to State; in California the median payment was \$50, in Mississippi \$6.

The assistance payment does not necessarily represent the entire income of the blind person who receives it. According to the social-data reports, 78 percent of the recipients had no regular income other than the assistance payment. Twenty-two percent were receiving some other regular income: 12 percent had some income from relatives and friends; 5 percent, from earnings in sheltered employment, self-employment, or other employment; and 5 percent, net income from real property, sale of farm produce, or other sources.

It should not be concluded that even those blind persons with no other regular income lived solely on the assistance payment. Some of them doubtless had resources which did not produce money income, such as homesteads. Furthermore, 85 percent of them were living in household groups: 15 percent with husband or wife only; 23 percent with husband or wife and others; 39 percent with relatives, not a husband or wife; and 8 percent with nonrelatives. The assistance payment to persons living in household groups

may be intended to cover the needs of the family or of the blind individual only, depending on the budgeting practices of the public assistance agency. Of the 15 percent not living in household groups, 2 percent were living in private institutions, and 13 percent were living alone.

More information is needed concerning the amounts and types of income of households with a member on the assistance rolls. We know, however, that about one-fourth of the persons accepted for aid to the blind were in households which were to receive other public or private aid simultaneously with the grant of aid to the blind: 8 percent were in households getting general relief, 7 percent in households receiving old-age assistance, 6 percent in households with a member employed on a Work Projects Administration project, and about 4 percent in households receiving some other form of aid or another grant of aid to the blind.

#### ***Recipients Dropped From Rolls***

So far, discussion has been limited to the persons accepted for aid to the blind. Of equal interest are those for whom aid is discontinued. In 1938-39, for every 100 persons added to the rolls, 56 were dropped. What are the circumstances resulting in the discontinuance of aid? According to the reports, of the 6,300 persons for whom aid was discontinued, 8 percent were dropped because vision was improved or restored; 11 percent became self-supporting for reasons other than the improvement or restoration of sight; relatives or friends assumed the support of an additional 11 percent; 8 percent were admitted to institutions; and 39 percent had died. The remainder were dropped for a variety of other reasons.

#### ***Information Needed in the Future***

For better understanding of the people receiving aid to the blind and of their need for supplemental services, further facts should be available. Of the people on the rolls, how many are totally blind? For those with some vision, what is the extent of impairment? How many have limited peripheral vision? What are the underlying causes of the eye conditions, and what are the sites and types of affection? For how many persons is medical or surgical care recommended to conserve or improve vision? How long have the people on the rolls been blind? Such facts need to be related to age, race, sex, and residence as a basis for planning programs for teaching Braille and providing vocational and other instruction and as the basis for providing medical and hospital care for conserving and improving vision.

Fortunately in another year such data will be available according to a uniform plan for many States. The Division of Public Assistance Research of the Social Security Board has completed plans for a study of the causes of blindness of recipients of aid to the blind, to be made voluntarily in certain States administering programs for aid to the blind. This study is based on the classification of the causes of blindness compiled by the Committee on Statistics of the Blind of the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness and the American Foundation for the Blind; material in the manual of the Committee is being utilized. Because of the Committee's work the way is paved for obtaining facts which should lead to more intelligent planning for supplemental services for recipients of aid to the blind and other blind persons and for further measures for the prevention of blindness.