

# The paradox of Providence

**Chester Smolski**

Providence is a city of poor people, yet Providence is a rich city. This apparent paradox requires some explanation.

Figures recently released by the Department of Social and Rehabilitative Services (SRS) statistically substantiate the presence of an inordinately large number of poor people in our capital city. During this past fiscal year there was an average of 18,591 persons, two-thirds of whom were children, who received financial help through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). This figure represents 37 percent of all AFDC recipients in the state, although Providence's share of total state population is only 18 percent. In other words, Providence has more than twice the number of poor people than would be expected from its population.

In addition to AFDC recipients, SRS also provides financial help to needy people without children through General Public Assistance and to the working poor with medical payments. The number of persons receiving this help in Providence averaged 2,513 during fiscal 1978. When added to those needy receiving AFDC, the total number of people receiving SRS payments in our capital city is over 21,000. Stated another way, one in every eight residents of Providence is on "welfare." No other community in the state approaches this proportion.

When considering the unusually high proportion of elderly in the city (15 percent of the population is 65 years of age and older), most of whom subsist on Social Security payments, and the large numbers of minority persons, many of whom are working for minimum wages, it is no surprise to discover that Providence ranks 37th in the state in median family income, with only Central Falls

and New Shoreham ranking below our largest city. There is no question that Providence is a city of poor people whose needs are greater than the city is able to meet, even with the help of numerous federal programs.

Yet Providence is also a rich city, probably richer than many residents of the city and state realize or appreciate. As the first settlement in the state, it has strong traditions and a colorful history which traces religious freedom in this country, among other things, back to a banished-from-Massachusetts minister who estab-

## *The richness of Providence is very real*

lished his faith first on this soil. The lovely First Baptist Church is a reminder of his work and influence here.

The soon-to-be renovated Benefit Street, lined with historic 18th and 19th century houses, is no museum piece, as in Colonial Williamsburg; rather, it is alive with people who live and work in an area which has been vibrant with activity for over 300 years. And we must extend a debt of gratitude to those preservationists who have worked diligently over the past 20 years to bring back one of the loveliest streets in the region.

Some of the most varied and noteworthy architecture to be found within any one-half square mile is located in the Providence downtown, including one of the best examples of 19th century commercial architecture, the soon-to-be renovated Arcade. Too often the eye-catching architecture of the downtown is missed because people direct their attention to the first floor level of these buildings. To be fully appreciated, downtown building beauty is best seen above that 12-foot level.

After visiting many other cities one comes to appreciate the human scale and the sense of intimacy of the compact

Providence downtown. Other downtowns have succumbed to the automobile, with greater spacing between buildings, wider streets and a resultant lack of this close association of elements. The danger is that Providence will make too many accommodations to the automobile and lose some of its people-oriented building arrangement. The auto restricted zone scheduled for Kennedy Plaza will do much to enhance and strengthen the role of the pedestrian in the downtown so that he can better relate to people and buildings, both of which are better seen from foot than by car.

One of the richest aspects of Providence is its variety of people, ranging from the strongly ethnic traditions of a Fox Point to those oldest and often wealthiest families living on the East Side. An old world Federal Hill, a middle class Mt. Pleasant, and a changing Washington Park are examples also of the diversity of neighborhoods that give color and challenge to the city. The recently arrived Latin Americans, Vietnamese, Cambodians and others have added their own special flavor to a city that has long known the experience of people who come in search of a better life.

With its museums, libraries, theater, dance, music and colleges, there is no question that Providence is the major cultural center of the state. And with the opening of the Ocean State Performing Arts Center soon to be a reality, the city's position as the state focus of the arts will be greatly enhanced.

Sometimes not noticed because of a lack of awareness and perhaps less obvious to the untrained eye, still, the richness of Providence is very real. The existence of this richness in juxtaposition to the highly visible presence of poverty is not really a paradox; it is simply a fact of American urban life.

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