Gen Stud
Immersion Prog.

Learning What It's Like To Be Poor

by Henry S. Resnik

Society's greatest problem, some observers believe, is inertia—not enough Americans care about the poverty and despair around them to do something about it. How to make them care? Author Resnik describes an experimental approach which gives participants an up-close, often dramatic education few are able to forget.

Americans read about "social problems" and, when they erupt into violence, see them on television. But, say social activists, they are not moved enough—don't care enough—to do much about these problems.

Judging from the long list of experimental programs which have failed, the activists seem to be right. Somewhere in the vast machinery for social change is a lack of will which constantly defeats America's effort to deal with its urgent problems.

The conviction is growing that what affluent America needs is a vivid, shocking exposure to the lives and hardships of the "separate and unequal" society identified by Michael Harrington in 1962 and the Kerner Report in 1968. This conviction has inspired what could ultimately prove to be, if the idea spreads, a particularly effective remedy to inertia—programs which offer those who participate immediate, personal contact with the poor and underprivileged, in their own difficult world.

Similar to sensitivity training in their focus on vital experiences that jolt people into awareness, but entirely different because they concentrate on social rather than individual problems ("We've been dealing more with issues," says one program director, "than with navels."), these programs vary somewhat in structure and length, but generally espouse an almost universal set of principles.

Most important is the assumption that personal experience = empathy = action. Only by working in a ghetto poverty office, for example, can one learn and do something about the advanced paralysis of the antipoverty bureaucracy. Only by applying for a job at a local day-labor office can one know the humiliating burden of defeat thousands of men bear as a matter of course. Only by living the life of the streets—by shedding one's middle class identity, including "respectable" clothes, money and credit cards—can one fully understand the futility of being poor.

Increased sensitivity to social problems by a relative handful of concerned citizens will not soon revolutionize American society. But these programs are another brave beginning, and their proponents are optimistic. "I have a strong gut reaction," says one, "that it's going to pay off. When people sit down in 1975 to talk about school busing, they'll remember what they experienced and how they felt about it."

Old Clothes and Little Cash

The Immersion Program, initiated in the fall of 1968 by the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, is a case in point. Inspired by an almost identical program that the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare had run for its own administrative staff in Baltimore, Maryland (and later discontinued for lack of funds), the Immersion Program began as a service for state governmental officials, but has since expanded to include people from all walks of life—clergymen, educators, professionals, a handful of businessmen and housewives.

There is no average length to urban training programs—they range from a half-day "ghetto walk" to a full year of living in a poverty area and working in a neighborhood agency. But the 48-hour Immersion Program, according to some critics, is too short. Robert C. Holmes, the program's director, is a pragmatist, however: "It's as long as we dare make it," he says, "to get the kind of people we want."

Groups ranging in size from 5 to 13 gather for a briefing session, usually on a Sunday night, at either the Trenton Rescue Mission, a refuge for derelicts, or the local branch of a "halfway house"

This Immersion man sits in basement room of New Jersey Rescue Mission, where new arrivals are brought in. He will spend the night there, role-playing as a derelict.

for ex-convicts making the transition from prison to the everyday world. During the evening, participants select from a list of nearly 50 community agencies the several that they intend to visit in the next two days, and go through exercises in role-playing (most will be playing roles for the duration of the program).

At the end of the evening, some of the men stay at program headquarters. Others venture out to the state hospital, a mental institution, where they sleep in the admissions ward, role-playing as new patients. One out of every four participants is a woman; they can choose from such possibilities as the women's ward of the mental hospital and a reformatory for girls. Before they leave, all participants are asked to change into old clothes and to surrender their money and possessions, except for the equivalent of a daily welfare allowance.

To keep the program "deliberately unstructured," Holmes has encouraged his groups to improvise as much of their experience as possible. "It gives people a sense of uncertainty," he says. "This is part of what we're trying to do. It's different each time." Participants are on their own, at any rate, for most of Monday until they return to the base for dinner and a discussion of the day's events. Holmes asks far more from participants than simply going to their appointed agencies at a given hour; he asks them to live the life of the streets—stand on a corner and panhandle for a while, have a snack in a soul-food restaurant, drink beer at a local bar, or even just sit on a stoop and watch the traffic go by.

Some Shocking Experiences

Not all Immersion participants give themselves over fully to the experiment. Most, however, work hard at experiencing it like it really is. Even the most timid have trouble keeping their cool in such places as welfare waiting rooms and employment centers—as a variety of experiences from recent programs makes abundantly clear:

The director of an urban planning group, disguised as a derelict, went to apply for an emergency daily allowance provided by a Trenton welfare agency and was rebuffed—the agency's door was locked 45 minutes before closing time.

A student from the Princeton Theological Seminary visited the Trenton Street Academy, an innovative, community-oriented school for high school dropouts, and while witnessing a mock trial in one of the classes, had the alarming experience of being put on the stand himself—for being white.

Two men from the program mingled for half a day with supposedly retarded children at a local residential school, and came to view the school, as one of them explained, "not as an institution for retarded children, but a place for bright kids who gave their parents and teachers too much trouble."

One college administrator was mugged.

Not all the experiences are as unstructured as Holmes and the participants would like them to be. Only a dozen of the agencies involved are completely unaware of the participants' identities, and some agencies—the state prison, for example—limit their contribution to a rigorous guided tour. (But even here imagination can bend precedents: one man from the program persuaded the warden to lock him in solitary for half an hour.) What the program is definitely *not*—though some agencies suspected it at the beginning—is an elaborate spy system; Holmes emphasizes that the program's intent is to influence the participants, not the institutions involved.

In Atlanta, Georgia, a nonprofit corporation called the Cornerstone Project, similar in many ways to the Immersion

In Chicago, the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission sends participants to community meetings, left, also sends them out in old clothes with a dollar a day in a program called The Plunge. According to Father Morton, below, many end up sleeping in flophouses.

Cornerstone, in Atlanta's ghetto, draws many participants from Government agencies. Below, women from HEW and HUD, with Cornerstone staff member George Reardon, get briefed by worker, right, at a church day care center.

Program, offers a two-week "seminar" during which the participants live in a project-owned house in the Summerhill ghetto. The participants are exposed in depth to the living conditions of both the poor white and the poor black. During the program they visit community institutions and antipoverty agencies, meet with community leaders, and participate in discussion groups.

Founded in 1964 by a group of law students, the Cornerstone Project originally operated only during the summer. It is now a year-round program in Atlanta, and growing to include a taste of Georgia's rural poverty as well. Federal agencies are actively participating in the project, which gives top level officials the opportunity to evaluate Federal programs from the point of view of the intended recipients. Most people involved in urban training programs agree that the longer they are, the more effective: the main difference between Cornerstone and Immersion is time.

The Los Angeles Police Department has a program called Project Empathy, which puts police officers in jail to see how it feels, sends them incognito to hippie love-ins in Griffith Park, and even offers a week's stay with a black family. And teacher-training programs in most large cities now feature experiences with the world of poverty that range from such brief exposures as "ghetto walks" to long periods of residence in the community where one teaches.

Workshops for Judges

The National College of State Trial Judges, a section of the American Bar Association located at the University of Nevada in Reno, which offers a continuing education program for trial and appellate judges of all 50 states, recently launched a series of "corrections workshops" based in part on principles of sensitivity training and using criminal offenders as an educational "resource." More structured than the Immersion Program or the Cornerstone Project, these workshops assemble roughly 100 people—judges, convicts, private citizens, police officers, prosecutors, probation or parole officers and correction officers—for a week or so of intense involvement that ranges from confrontation sessions and psychodrama to brief stays in various state penal institutions. The first of these workshops brought judges from all over the country to Reno —which, according to Laurance M. Hyde Jr., dean of the National College, made follow-up difficult when the judges returned to their home states.

In June 1969, a second workshop was held on St. John's College campus, in Annapolis, Maryland, co-sponsored by the Governor's Commission on Law Enforcement.

Participants, including the 21 non-uniformed prisoners from three state prisons, were inhibited and suspicious at first, but as the week wore on self-consciousness gave way to concern. Through role-playing the "cons" helped to demonstrate prison life "like it is . . . "; judges were "spiritually" shaken after a day in jail; a high-ranking police officer vowed that every future member of his force would be required to visit a prison.

It is too early to determine whether the forces set in motion will result in permanent changes in the system, not just affect people's momentary feelings about each other. But the workshop has already created so much impetus for prison reform that similar workshops are now being developed in several other states, uniting groups of community leaders—in addition to judges—around ongoing programs of reform.

Schools, too, are beginning to realize the importance of nonacademic learning about social problems. Many colleges, both urban and rural, have launched an "urban semester"—usually at least two months long—during which students

the situation was "really explosive"

live and study in the urban environment, frequently in poverty areas. The University of Southern California, for example, uses all of Los Angeles as a resource. The Great Lakes Colleges Association, a consortium of small liberal arts colleges in Indiana, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin, has an urban semester in Philadelphia. At one secondary school, the Madeira School for girls in Greenway, Virginia, classes do not meet on Wednesday. On that day, students are free to leave campus—and many of them use the time to work in Washington hospitals, elementary schools and social agencies.

Taking "The Plunge"

What may well be the granddaddy of urban training programs is the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission, which draws its clients from 50 states and is supported by more than 20 different denominations. Founded in the fall of 1964 and located on Chicago's West Side, the Urban Training Center is aimed predominantly at church personnel—ministers, priests and nuns—but also invites lay citizens from a variety of professions to examine major urban problems in a wide spectrum of programs ranging from month-long workshops to a full year in a community agency.

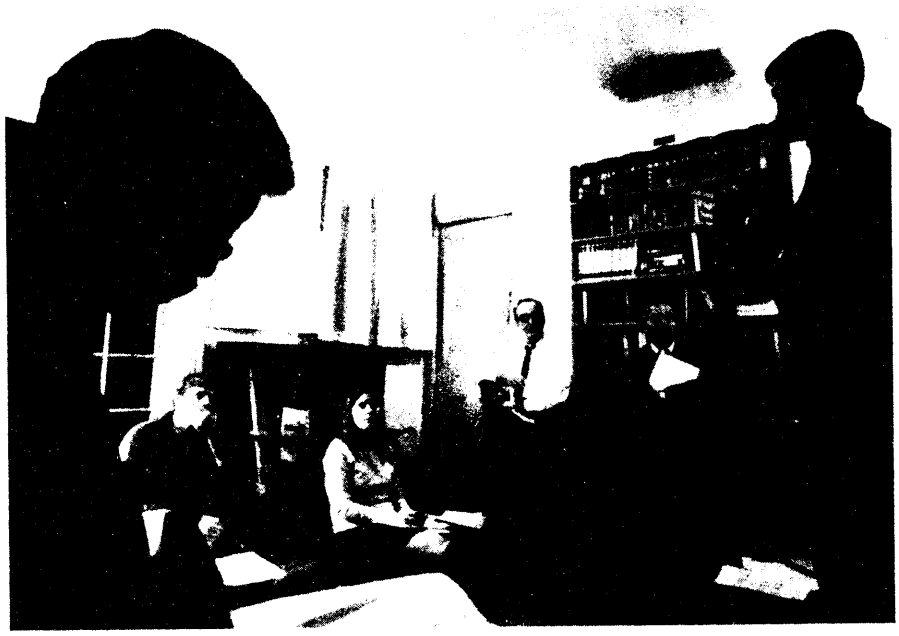
No matter how long the project, each begins with a four- or five-day experience called, simply, The Plunge—among the most rugged and demanding of all the sensitivity-oriented exposures to the world of poverty.

"We designed The Plunge for the first program we had," explains Father James Morton, director of the Urban Training Center, "in which the issue was unemployment. We felt you can't do training unless the people experience at a gut level the issue they're dealing with. So we sent them out on the streets in old clothes with a dollar a day, and we said, 'You have to make it.' They had to find their own places to sleep and eat—many of them ended up sleeping in flophouses, basements, even cars. The last group did it in 12-below temperatures."

There is, in other words, no safe "home base" to which the participants return at the end of the day; as much like residents of the ghetto as they can be, knowing that the experience will end in four days, they must learn how to survive. At the end of the first Plunge, Father Morton recalls, "the students felt the experience had been crucial, that 'anybody who is in the service or helping professions *has* to be put through this.' "

The Plunge is only the beginning. The main thrust of the training program is extensive study of a specific issue. A four-week session that ended earlier this year, for example, focused on federal antipoverty programs, model cities and urban renewal. During the week following The Plunge, participants dealt with such conceptual matters as planning, alternative strategies for change, and specific problems of decision-making, ultimately devising "back-home" projects for their own communities. Then, in the following week, the size of the group was more than doubled by a variety of resource people who came to take part in a closely related "issue forum" which amounted to a massive confrontation of differing viewpoints. This group included officials involved in federal programs, independent consultants and even community people who had organized as pressure groups against the poverty officials. The situation, comments Father Morton, was "really explosive."

The emotional impact of these pro-



After spending the night in a hospital, flophouse, on the street or simply touring poverty areas, participants in all programs regroup for discussion. Right, a New Jersey contingent compare notes.

grams is clear. Most participants say the experience has thoroughly shaken them up, that it was the most worthwhile part of their professional training by far, and that they will never be quite the same again.

Specific change is more difficult to track, with some notable exceptions. For example, a New Jersey hospital administrator who participated in the Immersion Program and who barely managed to get emergency treatment at a Trenton hospital when he role-played a man seriously injured, revised emergency admissions procedures at his own hospital in another county.

Because a "back home" project is required of every trainee in the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission, the 2,000 who have worked at the Center so far have produced 2,000 individual projects for their own communities.

Nevertheless, actual institutional changes generated by these programs have been disappointingly small. Why?

"There was a big debate in the department," says a founder of Immersion, "about what it could accomplish. Some people felt the department shouldn't do anything solely related to changing people and not institutions, that it was too indirect and long-range. The young people especially said the Immersion Program could only be justified if it could be shown to produce or lead toward some institutional change—a new attitude by a legislator, a revision of a city's welfare code. . . There was concern that we would be seen as exploiting the community, titillating white people's emotions. We told people: 'If you're disturbed by what you see, change it—do something about it.' "

The participants respond. Dean Hyde of the National College of State Trial Judges reflects the view of most program directors. "People come out saying, 'Obviously we've got to do some things differently.' A few try, where they're able. Whether the rest will . . . whether we can in the long run get enough of society's key people to come and see and think and act—all that remains to be seen." ■

At Cornerstone, An Awakening

Barbara Cristy, a personnel management specialist with the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and five years out of the University of Michigan, spent two weeks with Project Cornerstone in Atlanta. These are excerpts from her report to HEW.

Like my neighbors I lived in a one-family house with a lot of other people, in our case 14. We had to cope with rats, roaches and poor garbage collection. Like our neighbors, we worked hard at keeping the house clean. Unlike our neighbors we were *not* hungry . . . we would be leaving the ghetto . . . .

She was tall, slender and black. She wore no shoes, old clothes, and a worn, almost expressionless face. It took her half an hour to walk one city block. She was tired; she was defeated. . . She was our neighbor . . . .

It's 5:30 a.m. We are setting out on a tour of Atlanta, led by a black man. We are going to see *his* Atlanta. The buses are filled, mostly with black people. So are the streets. We are taken to a street that has many one-day employment agencies. They are open, and they are busy. Most of the people seated here are poor white men seeking work. We wonder, where are the blacks. . . . We walk a few blocks. It is still dark, but we can see a dirt lot filled with panel trucks and cars. The street is mobbed with black men, a few of whom follow a white man to a car and drive off. We see other black men drive off with a white man in a panel truck. These men are looking for work, any kind of work. . . . We walk a few more blocks to the park, which is beginning to fill up with those who have not gotten work by daybreak. They will try again at 5 a.m. tomorrow.

I am just now beginning to learn what is happening in the ghettos of America. I know now that our nation's priorities must change, that we must attack both individual and institutional racism without letup. ■