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## Poor Relief at the St. Joseph County Poor Asylum, 1877–1891

Bruce Smith\*

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The historiography of poorhouses in the United States is narrow in both time and place: most studies concentrate on antebellum examples in the northeast and little else.<sup>1</sup> Although midwestern poorhouses of the late nineteenth century have been virtually neglected, the scholarship that has been done focuses on institutional and policy aspects of poor relief or on reformers while ignoring everyday aspects of the poorhouse itself.<sup>2</sup> An examination of part of the history of the St. Joseph County, Indiana, poorhouse is a step toward documenting the postbellum experiences of poor relief recipients in the Midwest.

Although fairly consistent records exist for the period 1875–1895, the data from the years 1877–1879 and 1887–1891 were chosen because information contained no gaps, because termination data and comments for all admissions were given, and because the time period represented relative economic prosperity. Studying periods of economic depression would have shown a “worst case” situation, giving a distorted picture of the poorhouse. In addition to these considerations, the nature of Indiana poorhouses changed dramatically between 1895 and 1900. Increasingly referred to as

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, 1971); *The Almshouse Experience: Collected Reports* (New York, 1971); John U. Hannon, “Poor Relief Policy in Antebellum New York State: The Rise and Decline of the Poorhouse,” *Explorations in Economic History*, XXII (July, 1985), 233–56; and Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Frank R. Levstik, ed., “Life Among the Lowly: An Early View of the Ohio Poorhouse,” *Ohio History*, LXXXVIII (Winter, 1979), 84–88; Elizabeth Gaspar Brown, “Poor Relief in a Wisconsin County, 1846–1866: Administration and Recipients,” *American Journal of Legal History*, XX (April, 1976), 79–117; and Ethel McClure, “An Unlamented Era: County Poor Farms in Minnesota,” *Minnesota History*, XXXVIII (December, 1963), 365–77.

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"county infirmaries," their missions and populations changed. Comparing nineteenth-century figures with twentieth-century data would be misleading.

Although South Bend was not incorporated until 1831, St. Joseph County by 1850 had reached a par with the other counties of the state in its treatment of the poor.<sup>3</sup> Through successive investigations and calls for reform by state and local officials and by national reformers in the 1850s, 1870s, and 1880s, the poorhouse system underwent a series of changes that resulted in a much more standardized institution by the end of the century. The St. Joseph County Poorhouse<sup>4</sup> reflected these changes and represents a mainstream example of poor relief practice in Indiana in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

A useful place to begin any study of poor relief in Indiana is *The Indiana Poor Law*, published in 1936, which traces the evolution of the poorhouse system in Indiana from the beginning of statehood.<sup>5</sup> Also helpful are the reports beginning in 1889 of the Indiana State Board of Charities. Members of the board based their details on annual visits to all Indiana poorhouses, and frequently their reports offer explicit glimpses of poorhouse conditions.<sup>6</sup>

From the beginning of the state's history in 1816, Indiana legislators provided for the care of the wayward and the poor. In Article IX, Section 4, for example, the Constitution of 1816 stated: "It shall be the duty of the General assembly, as soon as circumstances will permit, to form a penal Code, founded on the principles of reformation, and not on vindictive Justice; and also to provide one or more farms to be an asylum for those persons, who by reason of age, infirmity, or other misfortunes, may have a claim upon the aid and beneficence of society; on such principles, that such persons may therein, find employment, and every reasonable comfort and lose, by their usefulness, the degrading sense of dependence."<sup>7</sup> In 1818 legislation provided for temporary relief in case of

<sup>3</sup> In fact, St. Joseph County Orphan Asylum was established by Theodore Badin in 1833 and incorporated by the state; it was thus a notable alternative to poor relief and was exempt from county overseers. See Indiana, *Second Report of the Board of State Charities* (November 1, 1890–October 31, 1891), 111–12.

<sup>4</sup> The terms "poorhouse," "poor farm," "county farm," and "poor asylum" may generally be used interchangeably, although there are often local variations in meaning. By the end of the nineteenth century the term "county infirmary" was widely used, as "county home" is now. Changing terminology usually reflected the evolving function of the county poor relief system.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Shaffer, Mary Wysor Keefer, and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *The Indiana Poor Law: Its Development and Administration with Special Reference to the Provision of State Care for the Sick Poor* (Chicago, 1936).

<sup>6</sup> Indiana, *First Report of the Board of State Charities* (March 1, 1889–October 31, 1890).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Kettleborough, *Constitution Making in Indiana: A Source Book of Constitutional Documents with Historical Introduction and Critical Notes*; Vol. I, 1780–1851 (*Indiana Historical Collections*, Vol. I; Indianapolis, 1916), 114.

sickness for those who lacked the capacity or means to care for themselves and for reasonable burial expense if death occurred under these conditions. Overseers in each county were to handle such situations, and funds for these services were to be drawn from county treasuries.<sup>8</sup> Three years later, in 1821, "An Act to provide for the erection of a house for the employment of the poor of Knox County" became the first statutory provision in the state for indoor, or institutional, relief.<sup>9</sup> The Knox County law called for three "reputable citizens" to replace the county overseers; these citizens were to provide accommodation, care, employment, and supervision to recipients, as well as to place children in apprenticeships. Additionally, the law required that annual reports on the number, ages, and sex of those housed in the asylum, as well as information about the children apprenticed, be submitted to the county commissioners (who were given appointive powers) and the circuit court (which could appoint visitors to inspect the asylum). Finally, the law charged that the poor be removed to the asylum as soon as it was completed.<sup>10</sup>

Indiana's Constitution of 1851 expanded the state's care to the insane, deaf, and blind when it gave responsibility for their treatment to the General Assembly. The constitution also authorized each county to purchase land to be used "as an asylum for those persons, who, by reason of age, infirmity or other misfortune, have claims upon the sympathies and aid of society."<sup>11</sup> In 1859 legislation assured the poor of competent, county-subsidized medical attention, an arrangement that remained in effect until county hospitals appeared after the reform wave of the 1890s. Sickness, cited as a major cause of financial difficulties, was increasingly attacked as a cause of poverty and was no longer seen as a result. In the aftermath of reform investigations in the 1890s, the state in 1899 created county councils as a check against possible abuses by county commissioners; one effect was to limit commissioners' role to indoor administration since they were prohibited from dispensing funds from the county treasury.<sup>12</sup>

"Outdoor relief," that is, relief in the form of material goods or cash given directly to persons without the requirement that they submit to a term of residence in the poorhouse, was the function of

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<sup>8</sup> Shaffer, Keefer, and Breckinridge, *The Indiana Poor Law*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. The Knox County act was the prototype for a statewide law passed in 1831 that authorized each county to build its own poor farm. *Ibid.*, 34. Nevertheless, methods of poor relief remained uneven; as late as 1891 the Board of State Charities reported that ten of the state's ninety-two counties still "farmed out" their poor by contracting with individuals for their care on a year-by-year basis. See Indiana, *Second Report of the Board of State Charities*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Shaffer, Keefer, and Breckinridge, *The Indiana Poor Law*, 17-18.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 121.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-22.

the already powerful township trustee. Individuals requesting help from the county went to the trustee's office first.<sup>13</sup> If outdoor relief were appropriate, then one did not move into the poorhouse.

Provision for the poor in St. Joseph County began humbly in 1831 when county commissioners rented houses in South Bend for the destitute and frequently paid individuals for boarding paupers. Consolidation of paupers in a single facility was an objective as early as 1839, when commissioners requested that local officials "forthwith convey all the paupers in their several townships to said Poor house as well as all that may become paupers . . ."<sup>14</sup> At their meetings in 1839 and 1840 the commissioners appropriated funds for items large and small. Among other things money was allotted for the removal of the poor from the county, for furnishings in the poorhouse, and for food and firewood. David True, for example, was given \$2.57 for boarding a pauper for six days. Levi Hildreth was reimbursed \$43.43 for eight days of boarding. In 1841 rent for the poorhouse was ordered paid to Willaim S. Vail in the amount of \$46.66 for four months. As superintendent of the poorhouse, Daniel Fuller was paid \$20.00 per month. Alexander Holloway was given \$4.50 for boarding paupers and furnishing a small coffin, and George Stephens was paid \$15.75 for three coffins. Attendance upon and medicine for a needy family and others were charged at \$35.37 and paid. Dr. Griffin Smith was paid the considerable sum of \$120.00 for care and medicine for a poor individual. Other expenses covered shoes for a pauper and hay and cowbells for the cows kept for the benefit of the poor at the poor farm.<sup>15</sup>

The poor relief budget grew over the years and reflected changes in practice at the poorhouse. In 1841 the commissioners instructed the new supervisor of the poorhouse that "it shall be his duty to examine the condition of said paupers at least once in each week and whenever in his judgement he shall find that any pauper has so [recovered] in health and strength to be able to support themselves, he shall forthwith discharge them."<sup>16</sup> A careful look at relief expenditures reveals widespread sickness, as in 1845 when,

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<sup>13</sup> Research is badly needed in the area of township trustee budgets and expenditures in order to determine whether the outdoor relief cutbacks documented for eastern cities in this period were adopted elsewhere. This study makes no attempt to deal with this aspect of the larger poor relief picture. See Indiana, *Fifth Report of the Board of State Charities* (November 1, 1893–October 31, 1894), 81–84; and Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York, 1986), 46–52, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Record of the Proceedings of the Board of Justices of St. Joseph County, Vol. I, 1830–1841 (Northern Indiana Historical Society, South Bend, Indiana). Successive volumes of these records are entitled Commissioners Record.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–41; Commissioners Record, Vol. II (1841–1844), p. 4, St. Joseph County Auditor's Office, South Bend, Indiana. Names of individuals mentioned in records as receiving relief have been intentionally omitted throughout the article.

<sup>16</sup> Record of the Proceedings of the Board of Justices, 572.

in addition to the regular poor relief expenses of \$714.40, an additional \$322.96 was expended for those who had smallpox.<sup>17</sup> The records also show that a poorhouse and a poor farm existed in 1847<sup>18</sup> and that by 1852 expenses for care of the insane appeared in the budget.<sup>19</sup> Poor relief was often 10 percent or more of the Board of Commissioners' annual budget.

In 1852 when the state legislature authorized the counties to purchase land to use as a poor farm, the St. Joseph County commissioners purchased a plot of 240 acres, then just east of South Bend and now bordered by McKinley, Ironwood, Jefferson, and Greenlawn streets. On this site the commissioners ordered construction of poorhouse facilities which the county used from 1857 to 1907. The poorhouse's location was convenient—both for the administrators and the poor. It could be easily reached for inspection, but it was far enough removed so as to be outside the potentially evil influence of the city. It was also located on the boundary line of the two most populous townships in the county (Penn and Portage), which happened to supply most of the admissions. It was at this location that the records used in this study were compiled.

South Bend, already a thriving city of 13,280 in 1880, grew by half in ten years, approaching 22,000 by 1880. The county's growth from 33,178 people in 1880 to 42,457 in 1890, while not as large, was still significant. South Bend was located in Portage Township, and in both census years only an additional one thousand residents lived in the township outside the city boundaries.<sup>20</sup> Favored with water power, rail transport, and productive agricultural hinterlands, South Bend boasted a considerable industrial and manufac-

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<sup>17</sup> Commissioners Record, II, 51-52.

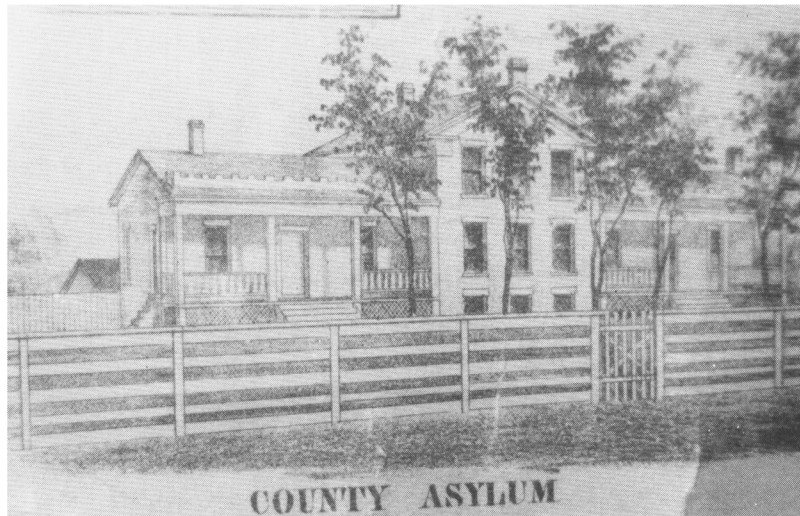
<sup>18</sup> Commissioners Record, Vol. III (1844-1855), p. 176, St. Joseph County Auditor's Office, South Bend, Indiana. In 1847 Dorothea L. Dix gave the following comments on St. Joseph County's relief system: "The poor-house and farm . . . is situated on the Michigan Road, six or seven miles south from the Bend. The farm contains 200 acres, with a remarkably pleasant and convenient family residence. The building in which the poor are kept is in the rear of this, and very defective in construction and in the general plan, and poorly furnished. I found here but two who were dependent on the public and on the Superintendent for their support and daily comforts; one, an insane man, who had in the winter been found in the woods with his feet frozen; the other, an aged negro.

"The number of inmates increases as the winter months advance. Formerly the poor were kept in the town, but serious evils attended this arrangement, and now the opposite extreme is adopted, they being too far removed to come under the frequent and benevolent supervision of official persons and the Christian visitor.

"The superintendent receives \$200 for carrying on the farm, and I think receives all supplies for family use from the overseers, a plan not likely to prove either economical or satisfactory, or at all desirable. Average cost of the poor for the four years preceding their removal from South Bend, \$600." Quoted in Helen Wilson, *The Treatment of the Misdemeanant in Indiana, 1816-1936* (Chicago, 1938), 97.

<sup>19</sup> Commissioners Record, III, 520.

<sup>20</sup> Thus, for all practical purposes, Portage Township was South Bend. See U.S., *Eleventh Census, 1890: Compendium*, 16, 451.



ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM, 1863

Courtesy Northern Indiana Historical Society, South Bend.



LOCATION OF THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM, 1895,  
BETWEEN SOUTH BEND AND MISHAWAKA

Reproduced from George A. Ogle, comp. and pub., *Standard Atlas of St. Joseph County, Indiana* (Chicago, 1895), 40.

ENTRIES FROM THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM LEDGER,  
1890-1891

Register, by the Superintendent, of the Inmates						
No.	NAME	DATE OF ADMISSION			AGE	SEX
		Month	Day	Year		
8 25		Oct	10	1890	90	Female Boardless Portage 55
8 26		Oct	10	1890	73	male Trustee Portage 55
8 27		Oct	11	1890	90	male Trustee <del>Portage</del> 55
8 28		Oct	15	1890	22	male Trustee Trustee 55
8 29		Nov	3	1890	19	male Trustee Portage 55
8 30		Nov	13	1890		female Trustee Portage 55
8 31		Nov	26	1890	73	male Sheriff 25 70 00
8 32		Dec	10	1890	84	male Trustee Portage 55
8 33		Dec	20	1890	29	male Sheriff 25 70 00
8 34		Dec	27	1890	80	male Trustee Portage 55
8 35		Jan	6	1891	14	Female Trustee Portage 55
8 36		Jan	12	1891		male Trustee Portage 55
8 37		Feb	1	1891	70	male Trustee Penn 55
8 38		Feb	27	1891		Female Trustee Portage 55
8 39		Mar	10	1891	92	Female Trustee Portage 55
8 40		Mar	13	1891		male Trustee Portage 55
8 41		Apr	1	1891	65	male Trustee <del>Portage</del> 55
8 42		Apr	2	1891	89	male Trustee Portage 55
8 43		Apr	20	1891		male Trustee <del>Portage</del> 55
8 44		May	16	1891		Female Trustee Portage 55
8 45		May	30	1891		male Trustee Penn 55
8 46		June	17	1891		male Trustee Penn 55
8 47		June	18	1891	84	male Trustee Penn 55
8 48		June	20	1891	72	male Trustee Portage 55
8 49		July	11	1891	90	Female Trustee Portage 55
8 50		July	13	1891	19	Female Trustee Penn 55
8 51		July	14	1891	38	male Trustee Port 55

NAMES HAVE BEEN INTENTIONALLY OMITTED

of the County Asylum for St. Joseph County, Ind.		
NAME	DATE	REMARKS
Howards	1891	was blind on 10 June 1891
He became feeble & incontinent	9 1891	First of old age and general debility
Remitted	13 1891	left voluntarily
Miss Davis	1891	20 1891 left voluntarily
Lord Howard	Jan 20 1891	Discharged and to change
burnt out by fire children		
Ensom	Dec 4 1890	for blind at St. Louis
Disturbed	Dec 11 1892	Discharge of old age taken by hospital
Left & incontinent	Jan 20 1891	Discharged with the mother
Remitted	Apr 20 1891	Left to get goods
Child born near 25 91		Went by Mrs. Good
Discharged from home 25 Apr	2 1891	Left want to be blind to get work
Discharged from home 25 Apr		
Discharged from home 25 Apr	17 1891	Left voluntarily went to work
Discharged from home 25 Apr	8 1891	First of coming sent to St. Louis
Discharged from home 25 Apr	May 8 1891	Left want to be blind to get work
Discharged from home 25 Apr	May 10 1891	First of a blind patient
Left Drump	Mar 16 1891	Discharged in impaction
Left Lamy from		
Discharged from home 25 Apr	May 11 1891	Left to get work
Discharged from home 25 Apr		Taken to St. Louis Hospital
Discharged from home 25 Apr	Dec 1 1891	Went to St. Louis to live with
Discharged from home 25 Apr	May 30 1891	Discharged
Discharged from home 25 Apr	June 18 1891	Discharged from resident
Discharged from home 25 Apr	June 18 1891	Home to Mrs. H. H. H.
Discharged from home 25 Apr	Oct 5 1891	Discharged for getting drunk
Discharged from home 25 Apr	July 15 1891	Discharged her husband able
Discharged from home 25 Apr	July 16 1891	Left to go home to St. Louis
Discharged from home 25 Apr	July 27 1891	Went to work for St. Louis



turing base by the 1880s. Six iron foundaries were listed in the 1882 city directory, including plow and range manufacturers. Studebaker was but one of four wagon and carriage enterprises. There were seven hotels, six newspapers, twenty-two dealers in machinery and agricultural implements, and thirty-nine saloons.<sup>21</sup> South Bend was a busy, growing midwestern town on the verge of an industrial boom.

On April 25, 1889, representatives of the Board of State Charities visited the St. Joseph County poorhouse facilities. Their description follows in full:

The asylum is located about one and one-half miles from South Bend on a productive farm of 240 acres, of which 50 acres is also used as the County Fair ground. The buildings are one story, cheaply constructed, partly brick and partly frame. The main building contains the Superintendent's residence, quarters for the help and rooms for the better class of women-inmates, and has a basement used as a kitchen and dinning-room; this building was in excellent order and very comfortably furnished throughout. There are two other one story buildings for the rest of the inmates, one of brick for the women and one of frame for the men, which are not very cheerful, but were in fair order and clean. In the men's building are several cell-rooms for the insane, in one of which there was an insane woman kept in seclusion, but in sight and hearing of the men, who use the corridor as a sitting-room. There are no children received; as St. Joseph County is the headquarters of the Children's Aid Society, which takes care of all the dependent children. There is a bath house with tubs, regularly used. Most of the paupers are feeble and old. The chronic insane, who are able-bodied, are for the most part usefully employed. On the whole the management appeared very good, with the exception of the treatment of the more violent insane, and the Superintendent and wife impressed me as being intelligent and conscientious people. An elaborate set of rules for the government of the Institution is displayed in each sitting-room and hall. If these are lived up to there will be little fault to find with this asylum. The Superintendent's salary is \$600 per annum. Annual net cost is about \$5,000. Average number of inmates about 47. Weekly cost per inmate about \$2.04.<sup>22</sup>

The reports of 1890–1891 and 1891–1892 were rather brief and insignificant, but the 1893 report was again quite detailed:

The asylum is upon a very fine farm of 240 acres, one and one-half miles east of South Bend. The land is valuable for agricultural purposes, but if sold would command a yet higher price because of its proximity to the city. There is a fine garden and considerable attention has been given to the cultivation of strawberries, grapes and other small fruits. When visited the Matron had just completed canning 500 quarts of fruit of various kinds, which had been stored in the cellar for the use of the inmates during the ensuing year.

The asylum is not such an institution as St. Joseph County should have. It consists of two buildings, one of brick occupied by the Superintendent's family in front and female inmates in the rear. The other building is a frame structure one

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<sup>21</sup> *The Register City Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, and Manufacturing Enterprises of the City of South Bend, Indiana for 1882* (South Bend, 1882), 177–97.

<sup>22</sup> *Indiana, First Report of the Board of State Charities*, 52. For information on the Children's Aid Society, see *Indiana, Second Report of the Board of State Charities*, 105–106.

story high, long and narrow, and is occupied by the male inmates. The last building was erected within the last few years, and is a great improvement over the facilities which existed before that time for caring for the poor. The arrangement of separate buildings for the men and women provides good sex separation.

When visited the asylum was found in a good state of cleanliness and the same may be said of the inmates. Bathing is required weekly of every inmate and each department has a bath tub. Clothing appeared to be of fair quality and the beds were furnished. The part of the asylum occupied by the Superintendent's family is heated by a furnace; the part occupied by inmates by means of stoves in the corridors. Some interior improvements in the brick building during the past year have increased the conveniences and comforts of the kitchen and dining room.

The farm has one of the handsomest and most commodious barns in the County. Fences are in good condition and the door yards are attractive and well kept.

Among the principal needs of the asylum are day rooms for the inmates, who now sit only in the corridors. A better water supply is urgently needed also. At present all water used in the asylum must be carried out of doors. The institution appeared to be in most particulars well managed. The Superintendent in control at the time of this visit was to be succeeded December 1st by a man who had offered to take the place for a salary \$50 smaller than the salary paid to the Superintendent already in charge.

The average number of inmates is about seventy-five, and the average weekly cost of maintaining each inmate is about \$1.565.<sup>23</sup>

Examination of the St. Joseph County Poor Asylum's ledger books reveals important information about the characteristics of the people it served although information was recorded primarily upon admission and release.<sup>24</sup> Thus descriptive terms at arrival and departure are provided, but nothing of the time spent at the poorhouse is detailed. The birth dates and sex of the children born to women who were admitted because they were pregnant were noted in the mother's entry along with the name of the adoptive parent, but such mid-stay notations were rare. In Michael B. Katz's study of Erie County, New York, race and nativity of relief recipients were noted.<sup>25</sup> In St. Joseph County, however, such information was given only twice in the years under study; one Indian and one "colored" man were the only exceptions in the sample. Without further investigation it cannot be assumed that the rest were white although the bulk probably were.

The township trustee, who was directly responsible for outdoor relief, was also required to see that those requiring indoor relief were sent to the poorhouse. Contrary to what one might suspect, poverty and destitution were not given as the most common causes for admission to the poorhouse. In most cases poverty accompanied other conditions and circumstances. People were obviously poor when they arrived at the poorhouse, but it is clear from records

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<sup>23</sup> Indiana, *Fourth Report of the Board of State Charities* (November 1, 1891–October 31, 1893), 190.

<sup>24</sup> St. Joseph County Poor Asylum Ledger, Vol. I (Portage Manor, South Bend, Indiana).

<sup>25</sup> Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 72-83.

that other factors combined with a condition of poverty to precipitate a stay at the poorhouse (see Figure 1). Sickness and age, for example, were major reasons; persons too ill to care for themselves or elderly men and women unable physically to practice food preparation or hygiene were often admitted. Many aged people, perhaps, either had no one who could house them or hoped to avoid burdening relatives or friends with their presence. The discharge category "taken away by relatives" applied to several elderly people after a short stay. The terms "orphan," "homeless," and "deserted" usually described women and children. The very young were normally not expected to provide their own living, and the loss of one or both parents added extra trauma to difficult times. Women left homeless because of abuse, separation, or divorce or because they had rebelled against parental authority or committed some indiscretion had no immediate means of support and often no place to stay. Most women who bore children at the poorhouse left within a few weeks "to find work." The homeless and deserted were probably capable of work and self-support but were caught without short-term means.

Sex ratios, however, showed clear patterns. More men than women were admitted in both time periods, but the proportion of women in the later group was much higher than the 1877-1879 group. Nevertheless, more than three-fourths of those admitted overall were male, which differs markedly from Katz's pre-1870 figures, but less so from his 1870-1886 data.<sup>26</sup>

Age on admission varied widely according to condition (see Figure 2). Those accepted primarily for old age were mostly in their sixties in the 1877-1879 group, but nearly all were in their seventies in the 1887-1891 group. The small number of admissions of those ages demonstrates that few people, particularly the poor, lived into their eighties in the late nineteenth century. Those who were sick when they arrived at the poorhouse were distributed very evenly by age (see Figure 3). Nearly equal numbers from the 13-19 age group through the 70-79 category were admitted for treatment of illness. The "simpleminded" and the "insane," however, tended to be in their twenties and thirties. Even though the 1887-1891 group covered a longer period of time, fewer admissions were recorded for mental disorders because new state hospitals for the insane were constructed or completed during this time and increasing numbers of the chronically insane were sent to Indianapolis or Logansport, where they received closer attention.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 76-77.

<sup>27</sup> See St. Joseph County Poor Asylum Ledger, I; Indiana, *Fifth Report of the Board of State Charities*, 30-39; Wilson, *The Treatment of the Misdemeanant in Indiana*, 31-44; Joseph J. Rogers, "The State and Its Insane" (Paper delivered at the Indiana Social Science Association, May 8, 1883, in Indiana State Library, Indianapolis); Indiana, *Report of the Board of Commissioners for Additional Hospitals for Insane* (1886); and Indiana, *Second Report of the Board of State Charities*, 66.

FIGURE 1: REASONS GIVEN FOR ADMISSION TO THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM

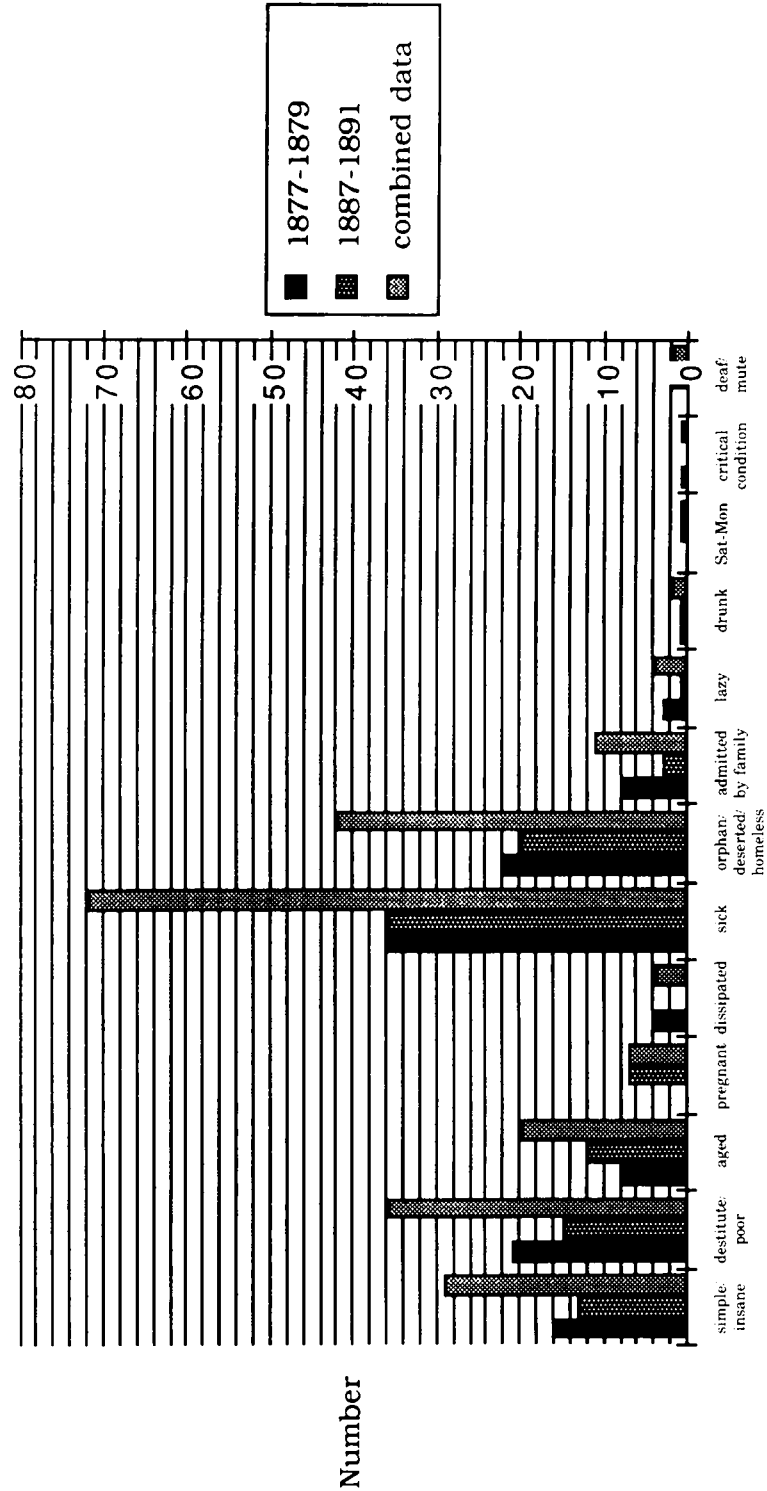


FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF ADMISSIONS TO THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM BY AGE GROUP

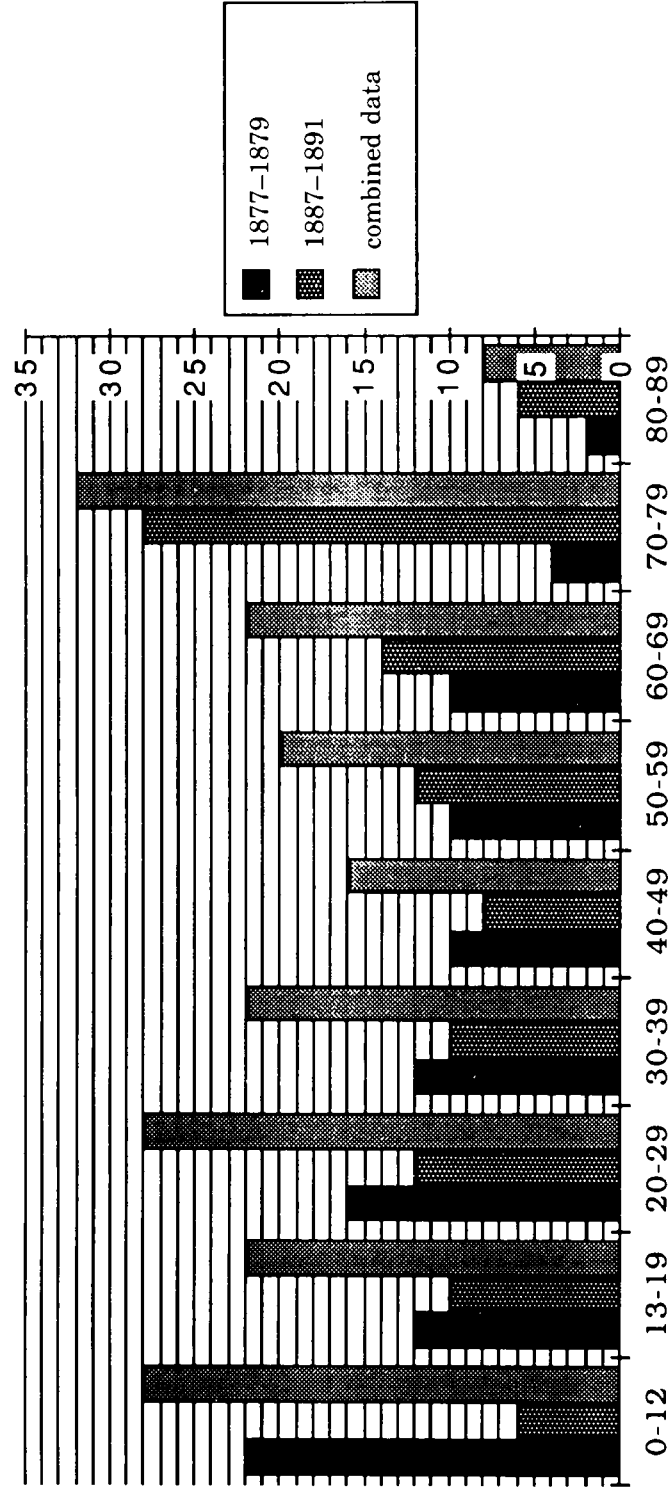
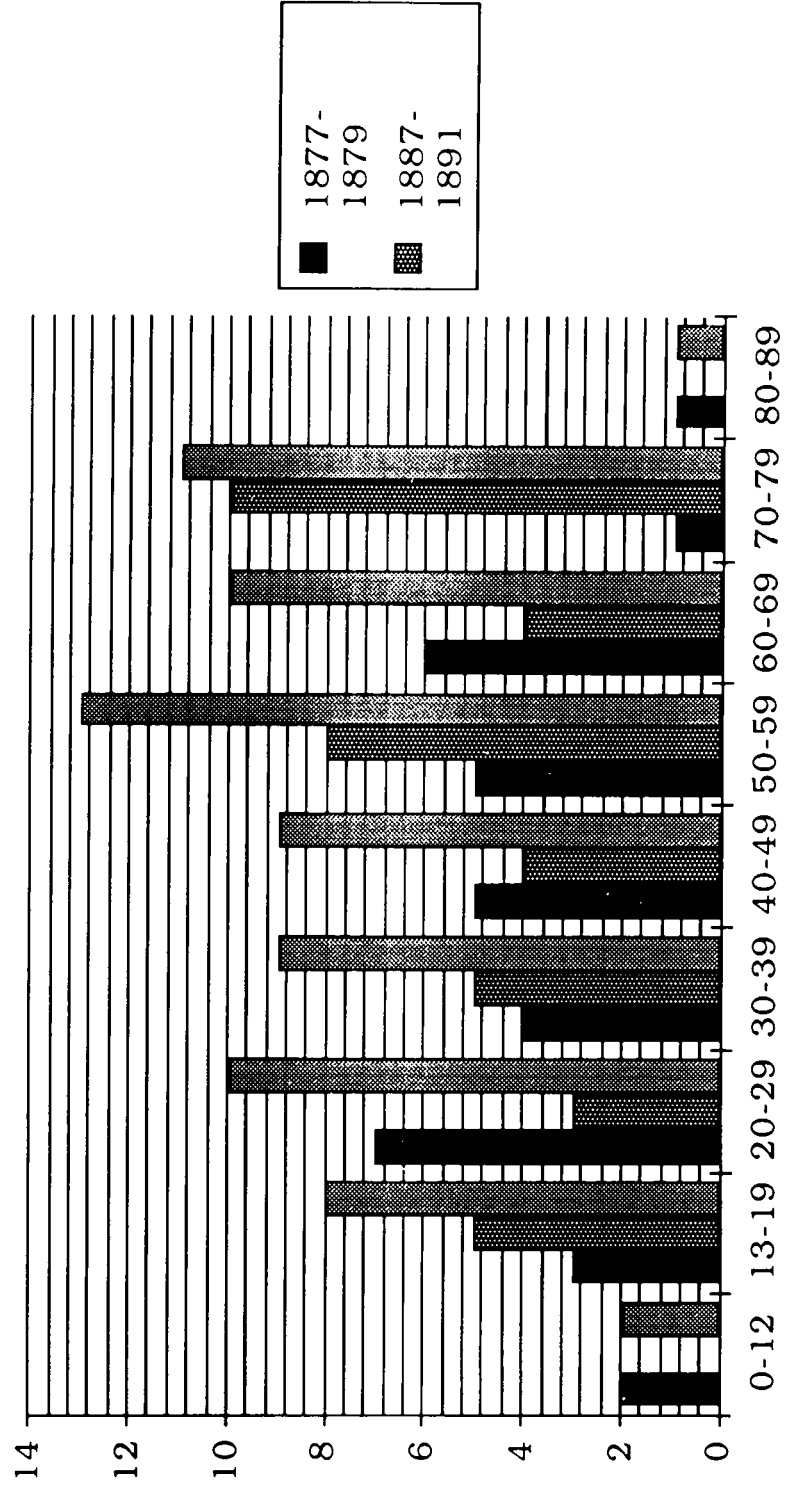


FIGURE 3: NUMBER OF ADMISSIONS TO THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM FOR SICKNESS



Simpleminded or insane people aged 60-80 were rare in the St. Joseph County Poor Asylum.

The two largest age groups admitted under the heading "des-titute/poor" were those in their forties and sixties. Only one person aged 30-39 was admitted because of poverty over the period of study. The very young and the very old were most often accepted because they were homeless. Over 58 percent of these petitioners were under twelve or over seventy, but some homeless people came from all age groups. Those admitted for pregnancy were most often aged 13-19; fewer women in their twenties sought shelter, and only one woman over thirty.

Given the severity of northern Indiana winters, one might expect seasonal patterns for admissions, but this was not the case (see Figure 4).<sup>28</sup> Entries to the poorhouse were highest in January, March, and May and relatively high in July, October, and December. These figures suggest that poorhouse admissions rose during periods of increased mobility; that is, when people traveled in order to look for work or perhaps in response to the seasonal pattern of agricultural labor. Arriving in South Bend or Mishawaka, sojourners may have spent a few days at the poorhouse while recuperating from illnesses and looking for new work. Warmer weather provided the opportunity for travel with reduced danger of cold. While at least one study of another region showed an increase during the winter months and decline in warm weather, seasonal variations tended to be a feature of large metropolitan areas.<sup>29</sup> South Bend possessed a considerable industrial base for its day, but it was not a metropolis by any definition. A few who were helped at the poor farm were from outside the county, but they did not stay for an extended period. The trustee referral system minimized aid for outsiders.

Death proved to be the second most significant means of escape from the poorhouse (see Figure 5), indicating the large number of elderly and seriously sick or injured who received care. Cause of death often does not appear in the ledger. Although some who died were taken by friends and relatives for burial, many were interred in area cemeteries or on the poor farm at county expense. It is a sad scenario to consider the sense of desolation that must have accompanied an approaching anonymous death in the poorhouse and burial at the county farm. Records also indicate that one could be discharged from the poorhouse; there was a distinction often made between "left voluntarily" or "left to get work" and

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<sup>28</sup> Katz also finds a weak connection between seasons of the year and poorhouse admissions in Erie County, New York. See Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> See Charles O. Burgess, "The Newspaper As Charity Worker: Poor Relief in New York City, 1893-94," *New York History*, XLIII (July, 1962), 249-68.

FIGURE 4: ADMISSIONS TO THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM BY MONTHS

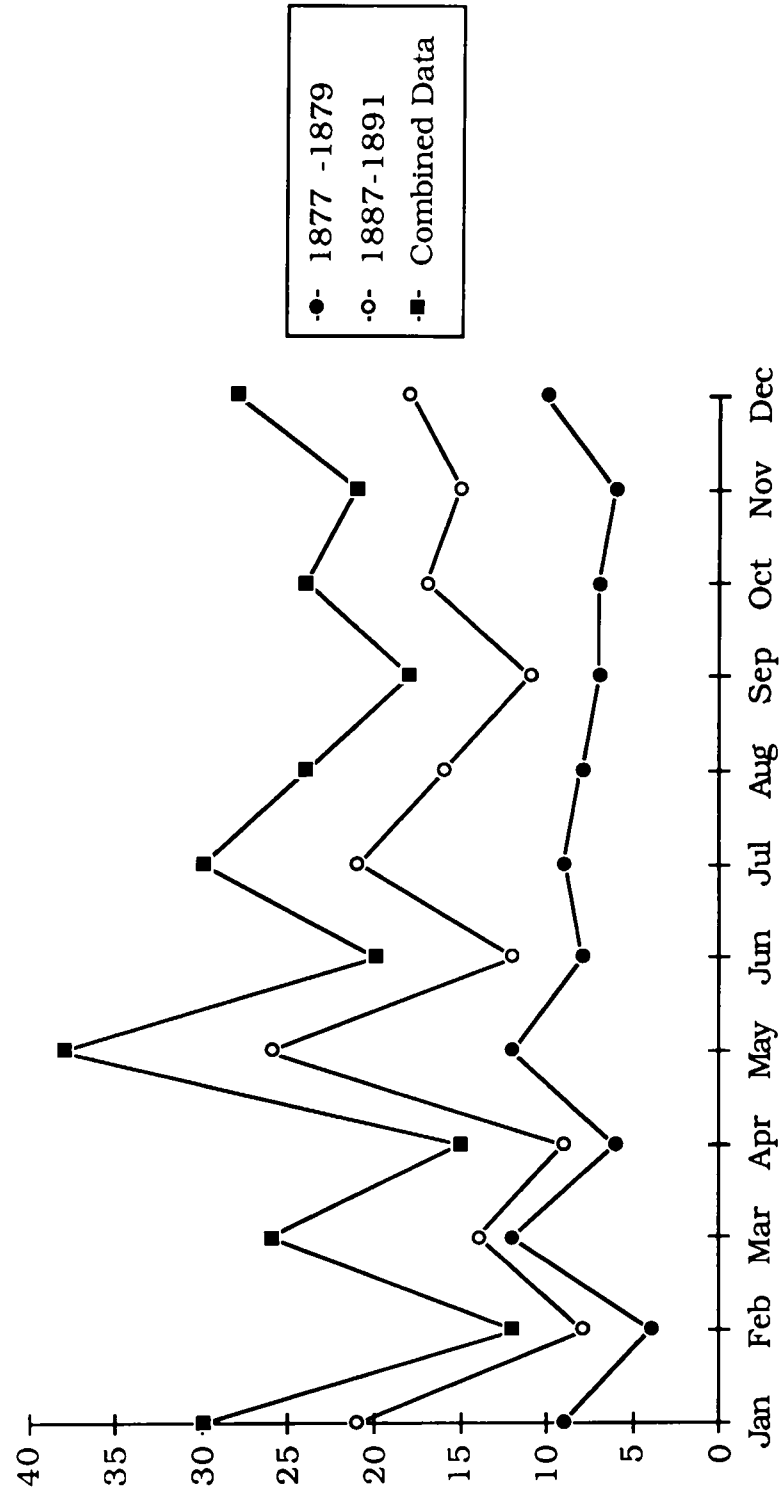




FIGURE 5: REASONS FOR DEPARTURE FROM THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM

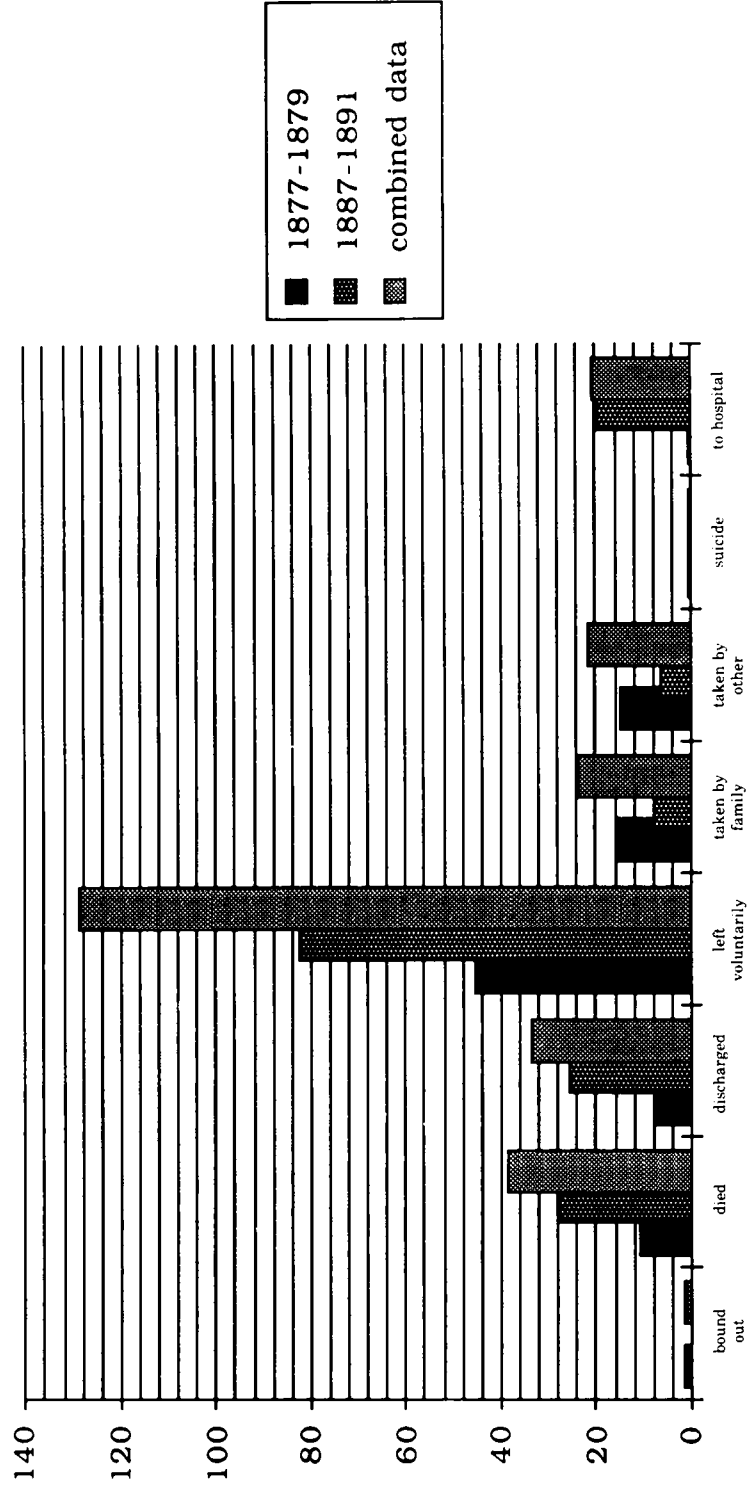
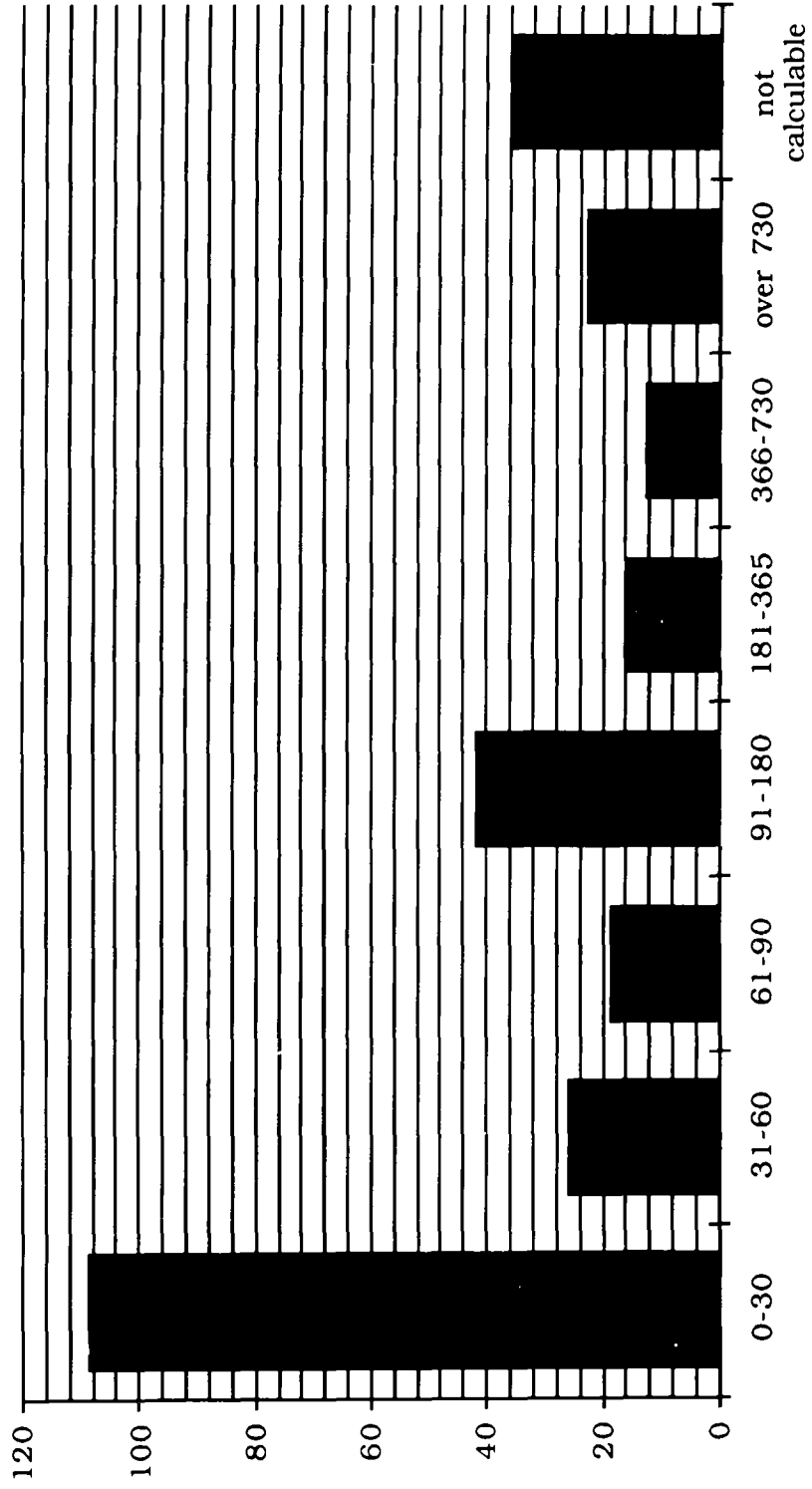


FIGURE 6: LENGTH OF STAY AT THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTY POOR ASYLUM, 1877-1891



"discharged." Those forced to leave may have worn out their welcome or have been judged able to provide their own care.<sup>30</sup>

Most residents of St. Joseph County's poorhouse were only temporary residents (see Figure 6). The average length of stay in the two periods was 311.1 days. This figure, however, is high because it reflects lodging of all residents; one elderly person stayed over sixteen years. For those sheltered less than one year, the average time was sixty-four days. The poorhouse most often catered to those who stayed less than thirty days; only the elderly tended toward permanent residency as a group. Others were assisted and then encouraged to leave.

Records indicate, then, that the St. Joseph County poorhouse was a short-term residence, although for the elderly it was often a long-term home and occasionally a final resting place. If it was not the most desirable place to live, eyewitness reports described it as at least minimally comfortable; surely it offered advantages over living on the street. The poverty of the poorhouse's residents was taken for granted, but other factors strongly influenced the decision to go there as well. Poor relief officials generally showed a genuine concern for the poor while simultaneously closely monitoring limited budgets. Their assumption, and the sense of the poor relief system, was that at least some help must be given to the helpless.

Sources also indicate that changes in outdoor relief policy, if they occurred in Indiana in this period, did not increase the number of individuals who were assisted at the poorhouse. The St. Joseph County poorhouse appears to have become more a home for the infirm and elderly just as total numbers in residence slowly shrank. If anything, changes became less, rather than more, punitive in nature. More research is needed to determine whether "less eligibility" became a criterion for the administration of outdoor relief in Indiana and the remainder of the Midwest and whether economic prosperity, poor relief policy, or an as yet unknown factor affected the composition of the residents of Indiana's poorhouse.

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<sup>30</sup> Numerical precision concerning this distinction is impossible with the present data.