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Sweet Charity? Emergency Food And The End Of Entitlement



Synopsis

Our country is changing its collective attitude toward poverty. Government support is out; volunteerism, workfare, and private charity are in--with a vengeance. Sociologist Janet Poppendieck studies this watershed through the lens of emergency food programs. Traveling the country to work in soup kitchens and "gleaning" centers, the author puts faces on these volunteers and the recipients of their good works. *Sweet Charity?* reports from the front line: from the "clients," who endure endless humiliations for meals too small to feed their families, and the well-meaning volunteers, whose enthusiasm cannot overcome the underlying causes of all the misery they witness, to the directors who find their homegrown programs becoming more and more "successful" while wondering if they are not in some way contributing to the very problem they're working so hard to solve. Timely and provocative, *Sweet Charity?* is the most persuasive argument in recent years that America cannot win a war on poverty with stopgap measures and empty rhetoric.

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Customer Reviews

Tens of thousands of programs across the U.S. distribute free food to the hungry, a type of charity, according to the author, that "comes with a price tag." In a hard-hitting, radical analysis of a national crisis, Poppendieck, director of Hunter College's Center for the Study of Family Policy in New York City, calls the food programs a Band-Aid approach to deepening poverty, which counterproductively relieves pressure for more fundamental solutions by enabling government to shed its responsibility for the poor. Poppendieck, who has participated in or observed food distribution programs in nine states across the country, meticulously investigates the factors she cites as driving people to the

soup kitchen or food pantry: low wages, unemployment, high housing costs, homelessness, disability and shrinking public-assistance benefits. She calls for a nationwide political movement to pursue an antipoverty, antihunger agenda vigorously through a reformed tax system, affordable housing, a stronger federal safety net and vastly improved public education and training. This is a book to prick the nation's conscience. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Poppendieck (director of the Ctr. for the Study of Family Policy, Hunter Coll., CUNY) examines whether volunteerism, food pantries, and soup lines do more harm than good in this thought-provoking work. (Poppendieck dealt earlier with hunger during the Great Depression in *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat*, LJ 3/1/86.) Here she explores the bitterness and frustration on both sides of the charity business of keeping people fed. During a bad economy, people "did the right thing" by pulling together to help each other. In the current strong economic times, she reports, people question the number of homeless and hungry and wonder why things haven't improved. The author investigates whether our present system of volunteerism?however charitable?is actually contributing to the problem instead of solving it by letting the government off the hook. This timely book is highly recommended for public and academic libraries.?Sandra Isaacson, U.S. EPA Region VII Lib., Las VegasCopyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

While there were a couple of good points made in the book overall it was extremely biased based upon the author's intent on writing it in the first place. While the author interviewed a lot of people she cherry picked comments and facts to support her position and I did not think that she made a good case for them even if some of what she argued for might be correct. The more telling fact is that it appears that while she is against charity and food pantries none of the people that she interviewed appear to be changing their operations to fit her vision. Two books that address food pantries and government programs and are much better are "Toxic Charity" and "The Vision of the Anointed".

This book on charitable efforts to end hunger in the US could use a second edition. That is, it's quite good, if not prescient in many ways, but it is starting to show a little around the edges because of political changes that have taken place in the fourteen years since its publication as well as the continued growth of a consortium of food banks called Second Harvest (now Feeding America). The central ideas of the book, a damning indictment of a giving approach to ending hunger, are as timely as ever, and the last three chapters, starting with the one on the "seven deadly in's" of charitable

giving (inefficiency, indignity, inappropriateness, etc.), sting as much as they ever did. Part of what prompted me to read this was listening to a state legislator baldly justify his hostility toward government programs by his annual donation of some turkeys. The ridiculousness and condescension of his position are exactly the kind of thing this book targets. The book concentrates largely on the 1980s and the rise of the notion of hunger in the US (and to a much lesser extent, around the world). How did it come about that whenever you decided you wanted to volunteer to 'help end hunger', that there would be someone in need? That was, indeed, a new phenomenon of a sort in the 1980s. What begs to be told now is how little attention the issue received during the Great Recession relative to what statistics demonstrate has been happening and how we can have discussions of budget cuts with so little awareness of what that would actually mean to people. The book is, on the whole, vivid and is animated by the awareness -- shared by many people involved in food distribution efforts -- that there's a chasm between the intentions of (most of) the people involved and the results of their efforts. They know that they're trying to fill a black hole but also that stopping would result in profound suffering. If you like this book, two others to consider are Poppendieck's *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (California Studies in Food and Culture) and then a book called *A People's History of Poverty in America* (The New Press People's History Series). The latter is, as its title suggests, on poverty in general, but it does a great job of putting the behaviors of hungry people into context.

I found *Sweet Charity?* to be intriguing, well-written and thought provoking. I'm looking at emergency food in America in a whole new way.

In "Sweet Charity" Janet provides us with a critical look at emergency feeding systems in the United States. This is not to say she disagrees with its existence, but through a comprehensive analysis, states that the proliferation of food banks, pantries and soup kitchens points to a real problem with hunger in what is a very wealthy nation by world standards. She further challenges that for hunger to end government **MUST** get and stay involved in a significant way. While food banking in this country has exploded and the incredible network of primarily volunteer driven emergency feeding programs on the front line have done and continue to do a great job, it simply is not enough. As the director of a food bank myself, it is not hard to initially be frustrated by Janet's review but after further reflection and reading you come to realize that she is not against emergency feeding, she is simply saying the immense growth of this industry points to a larger concern and the continued proliferation seems to support further abdication of the government's role and responsibility. Janet

also provides insight into volunteerism and the ways in which we "feed" our own "moral hunger" to serve those who are less fortunate. You will be challenged I think by her review here as well. Janet's research is based upon actual one on one interviews with all the various people involved in emergency feeding. She got her "hands dirty" to see what is really going on and gained insight into what people "on the front lines" are thinking. This book will make you think and think some more about hunger in our country.

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