

# RELIEF TRENDS IN CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, 1929-37

ANNE E. GEDDES\*

For the past 9 years Cambridge relief agencies have been participating in a current monthly study of relief expenditures in 116 large urban areas of the United States. From this study, which is now carried on by the Social Security Board, there is available an invaluable monthly record of the amount of relief distributed from public and private funds from January 1929 to date. This record sheds light on past relief developments and on the profound governmental, economic, and social changes that have characterized the period; it also affords some insight into the future. Similar analyses could be made in any of the other 115 participating urban areas.

The term "relief" is used to designate many different forms of aid or assistance given to needy families and individuals in their homes. Relief may be given in the form of direct cash payments or cash wages, or it may be given in the form of orders on stores, grocery baskets, clothing, rent, fuel, medical and nursing care, service of housekeepers, hospitalization, and burials. The term "relief" in this discussion does not include administrative expense, nor does it include care of transients or individuals in institutions and in foster homes.

## *Nine-Year Bill \$13 Million*

In the 9 years from 1929 to 1937, total expenditures or obligations incurred for relief in Cambridge by agencies reporting to the Social Security Board exceeded \$13 million, of which 95 percent was disbursed from public funds. This sum, which is exclusive of the cost of administration and of materials and equipment used in work-relief projects, represents substantially the total amount of noninstitutional relief distributed in the city.

A panoramic view of relief expenditures in the 108-month period is afforded by chart I, which shows the amount of relief distributed for five major classes of relief. These classes are: relief given by the private agencies; assistance to the

aged, the blind, and dependent children, under the Social Security Act; public general relief; earnings under the Civil Works Administration; and earnings under the Works Progress Administration. The chart shows a steady rise in the total volume of expenditures over the years, but this rise is accompanied by sharp fluctuations in total disbursements and by striking shifts in emphasis among the different classes of assistance.

To a considerable extent, changes occurring in the volume of relief since 1929 reflect the impact of the depression. But changing public attitudes toward the problem of dependency have also been a factor in the growth of the relief bill. Annual expenditures for the various classes of relief are shown in table 1.

## *Private Relief*

Private relief in Cambridge has constituted a consistently minor part of the city's relief bill. The private agencies are principally concerned with helping families meet their special problems, and they consider the giving of relief a secondary function. From 1929 to 1937, obligations incurred for relief from private funds aggregated \$664,000 or 5 percent of the \$13 million total expended from both public and private sources. Private agencies reporting their expenditures to the Social Security Board include the Family Welfare Society, the First Parish Paine Fund, the Salvation Army, and the Cambridge Unemployment Relief Committee. Some other private agencies, notably the St. Vincent de Paul Society<sup>1</sup> and other church organizations, have distributed some relief in these years, but their expenditures are believed to have been relatively minor. The Cambridge Unemployment Relief Committee was established in the early phase of the depression and provided the first work relief in the city. Construction of the Cambridge Municipal Golf Course was a principal project of this committee, which operated intermittently from December 1930 to July 1933 when the Federal Government entered "this business of relief." The important role played

\*Acting Chief, Division of Public Assistance Research, Bureau of Research and Statistics, Social Security Board. This article was prepared as the basis of a speech before the League of Women Voters, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 23, 1938.

<sup>1</sup> Expenditures of the St. Vincent de Paul Society from 1929 to 1937 were approximately \$65,000.

by the Committee is clearly revealed by the chart.

It is interesting that in 1937, despite the very large volume of public relief disbursed, the relief expenditures of the private agencies were 26 percent higher than in 1929.

**Special Types of Public Assistance**

The three special types of public assistance—old-age assistance, aid to dependent children, and aid to the needy blind—comprise the second layer of expenditures in chart I. Since early in 1936 these three types of public assistance have been financed in part from Federal funds under the provisions of the Social Security Act. As shown in table 2, expenditures for the special types of public assistance amounted to \$97,600 in 1929 and \$475,600 in 1937. The sharp increase is due in part, at least, to the influence of new legislation and of Federal participation.

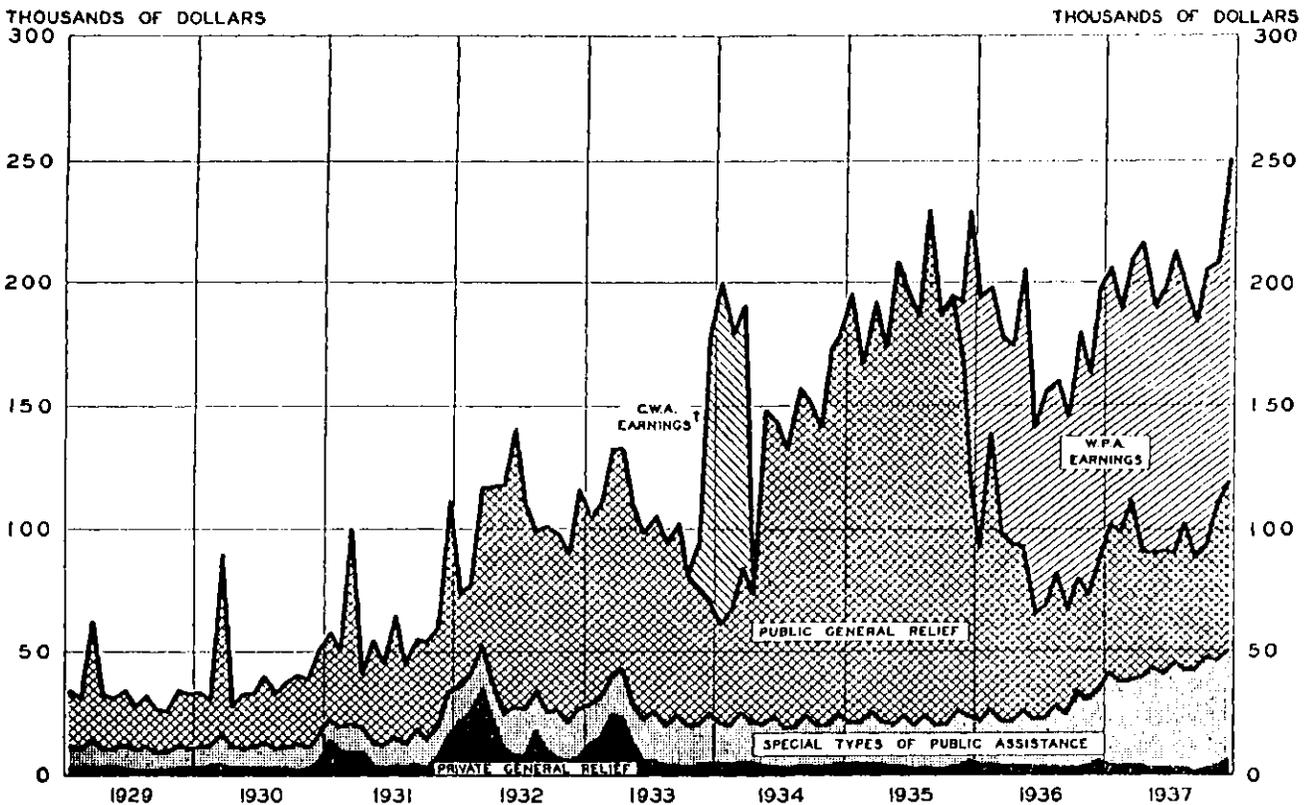
Old-age assistance, which is available to needy individuals 65 years of age and over, was first granted in Cambridge in September 1931, when new State legislation became effective. It is financed from Federal, State, and local funds and

is administered by a separate bureau of the Board of Public Welfare. Expenditures for old-age assistance in 1937 amounted to \$323,000 and comprised 68 percent of the bill for the three programs.

Aid to dependent children, which is financed from Federal, State, and city funds, is administered by the Board of Public Welfare. Prior to 1936 the program was known as mother's aid and was restricted to children living with widowed mothers or mothers with no means of support. Since that time the provisions of the law have been broadened. Expenditures in the 9-year period totaled \$854,500 and amounted to 45 percent of the aggregate amount disbursed for the public-assistance programs. Expenditures for aid to dependent children in 1929 were \$89,800 and in 1937, \$142,000, an increase of 58 percent.

Aid to the blind is administered by the Division for the Blind of the State Department of Education and is financed by State and Federal funds. Expenditures under this program amounted to \$90,900 and comprised about 5 percent of the total outlay for the special types of public assistance from 1929 to 1937.

**Chart I.—Total obligations incurred for relief in Cambridge, Mass., by months, 1929–37**



## Public General Relief

Over the 9-year period, public general relief constituted by far the largest proportion of all relief expenditures. Several kinds of relief are grouped under this broad heading: dependent aid or home relief, which is administered by the Board of Public Welfare; soldiers' relief, State aid, and military aid, which are administered by the Soldiers' Relief Department; and emergency relief, which from 1933 to 1935 was administered by the Emergency Relief Administration. "Dependent aid" is granted to both employable and unemployable persons not qualifying for the special types of assistance, and is financed almost exclusively from local funds; the State, however, pays the cost of care for persons without legal settlement in Massachusetts. Soldiers' relief is paid from local funds, military aid from both State and local funds, and State aid is financed wholly by the State. The relief program of the Emergency Relief Administration was supported entirely from Federal funds.

From 1929 to 1937, expenditures for public general relief amounted to \$7,519,000, or 58 percent of the \$13 million total expended. Examination of chart I reveals a striking increase in the volume of public general relief from 1931 until the inauguration of the CWA program and, subsequently, until the development of the WPA. During the operation of the CWA and WPA programs, the volume of general relief was greatly reduced. The peak in general relief disbursements was reached in 1935, when they constituted 83 percent of all relief in the city. In 1937 general relief represented 27 percent of the total relief bill.

One important fact not revealed by the chart is the essential continuity of the Federal Government's work-relief policies. Part of the general relief disbursements from the fall of 1933 to the end of 1935 were for work-relief benefits of the Emergency Relief Administration. These benefits under the ERA were based on the need of the individual family and were not determined by a fixed wage scale, as in the case of CWA and WPA earnings.

## CWA and WPA Earnings

During the winter of 1933-34, the CWA operated an emergency work program which was intended to stimulate recovery as well as to relieve destitution. Persons employed on this federally

operated and financed program were drawn both from the work-relief program of the ERA and from the general unemployed without certification of need. Wages on this short-lived, large-scale program were at going rates of pay. Earnings of workers on the CWA program, including earnings of the administrative staff, amounted to \$485,400. When this 4½-month program was terminated in the spring of 1934, those workers who were able to establish need were transferred to the work-relief projects of the ERA.

In October 1935, the WPA began operations in Cambridge. Total earnings of workers certified as in need amounted to \$2,459,786 from October 1935 through 1937. Earnings of workers on the WPA program are financed wholly from Federal funds and are fixed at a security or subsistence level. It is significant that in both 1936 and 1937, WPA earnings comprised approximately one-half of the annual relief bill.

## Other Relief

In the period from 1929 to 1937 some relief was dispensed in addition to the \$13 million total

Table 1.—Obligations incurred for public and private relief in Cambridge, Mass., by years, 1929-37

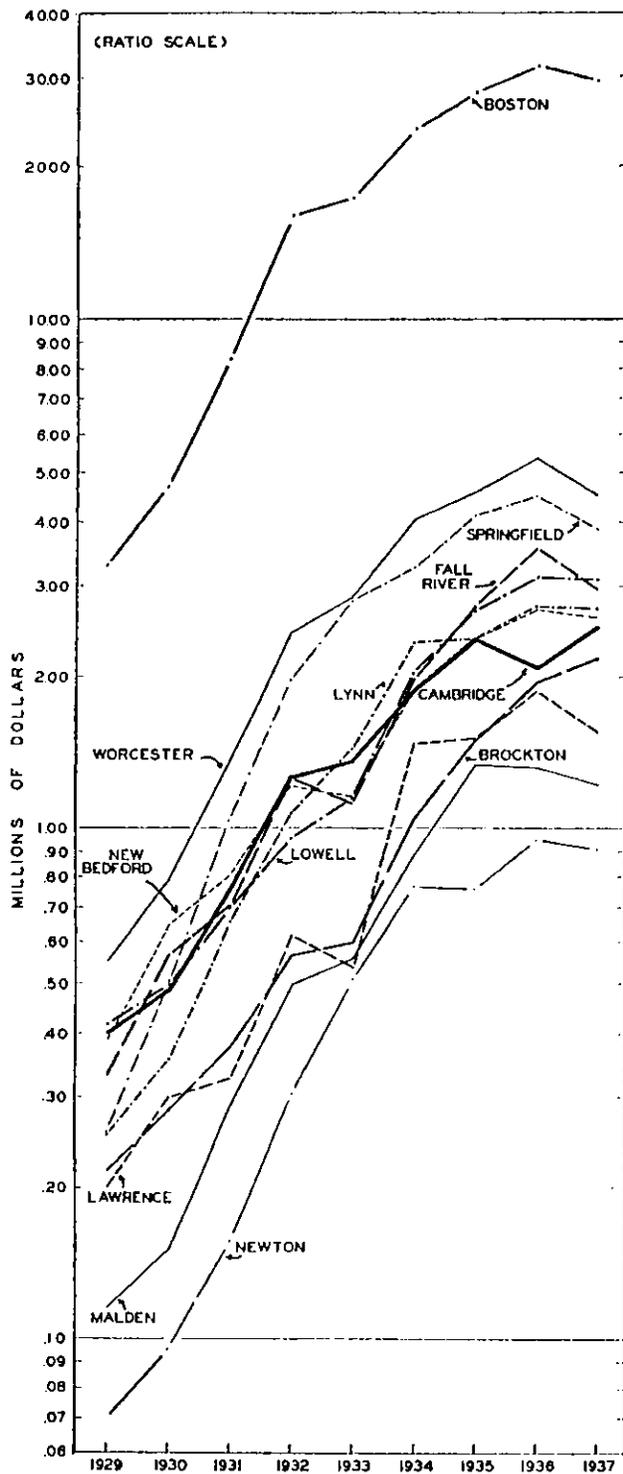
Year	Total obligations incurred	Public relief			Private general relief
		General relief	Special types of public assistance	CWA and WPA earnings	
Amount of obligations incurred					
Total, 9 years..	\$13,041,746	\$7,518,038	\$1,013,800	\$2,045,182	\$663,730
1929.....	401,072	208,038	97,613	-----	35,421
1930.....	485,381	336,200	100,710	-----	42,471
1931.....	731,231	530,808	130,101	-----	60,262
1932.....	1,258,650	876,200	202,058	-----	179,780
1933.....	1,343,921	888,301	207,712	128,208	122,613
1934.....	1,878,184	1,286,132	208,734	139,011	53,221
1935.....	2,358,605	1,058,782	218,782	129,000	49,001
1936.....	2,097,307	733,012	268,002	1,049,000	46,303
1937.....	2,473,371	671,459	478,504	1,281,786	44,622
Percent of total					
Total, 9 years..	100.0	57.0	14.7	22.0	5.1
1929.....	100.0	66.9	24.3	-----	8.8
1930.....	100.0	69.3	22.0	-----	8.7
1931.....	100.0	70.7	17.3	-----	12.0
1932.....	100.0	69.6	16.1	-----	14.3
1933.....	100.0	66.1	15.5	9.3	9.1
1934.....	100.0	67.0	11.0	19.2	2.8
1935.....	100.0	83.1	9.3	5.8	2.1
1936.....	100.0	35.0	12.8	60.5	2.2
1937.....	100.0	27.2	19.2	51.8	1.8

<sup>1</sup> CWA earnings. Includes earnings of administrative staff and all other persons employed on the program.

<sup>2</sup> WPA earnings. Includes only earnings of persons certified as in need of relief.

already accounted for. During 1932 and 1933, Government-owned wheat and cotton, which were

**Chart II.—Total obligations incurred for relief, in 12 Massachusetts cities, by years, 1929–37**



purchased by the Federal Government as a farm-relief measure, were distributed to needy families by the American Red Cross through community agencies. The value of this relief is not available. Since 1934, Federal surplus commodities, purchased by the Federal Surplus Relief and the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporations,<sup>2</sup> have been made available to Cambridge families, first through the private welfare agencies, the Board of Public Welfare, and the WPA and later through the public agencies only. The value of such surplus food and clothing distributed is in excess of \$500,000.

Considerable family relief has been provided in Cambridge through the Civilian Conservation Corps, but it is impossible to estimate how much assistance Cambridge families have received from this source. The CCC was established in the spring of 1933. Enrollees on this program have been selected primarily from relief families and have been required to allot the major portion of their monthly earnings to their dependents.

Other Federal agencies providing small amounts of relief in Cambridge during this period are the National Youth Administration and the Public Works Administration.<sup>2</sup> Wages paid to certified workers employed on the New Towne Court housing project of the PWA amounted to approximately \$31,700, but not all this amount was earned by workers residing in Cambridge. Student aid and earnings paid by the NYA to persons on Cambridge projects amounted to \$113,000. Some small amounts of relief not accounted for were also distributed during 1933, 1934, and 1935 in connection with the emergency education, college student aid, and transient programs of the ERA.

The grand total of all public and private relief distributed in Cambridge, from all sources except relatives and friends, is estimated to be roughly \$13.9 million for the 9 years from 1929 to 1937.

### *Expenditures Related to Population*

This review of the relief experience of Cambridge, which in 1935 had a population of 118,000, reveals a steady and inexorable rise in the extent of the relief burden. Per inhabitant, relief expenditures of the reporting agencies in the 9-year period totaled \$114.76. Annual rates for each class of relief are given in table 3.

<sup>2</sup> Data for these programs were obtained from the Works Progress Administration for Massachusetts.

**Table 2.—Obligations incurred for special types of public assistance in Cambridge, Mass., by years, 1929-37**

Year	Total	Old-age assistance	Aid to dependent children	Aid to the blind
Amount of obligations incurred				
Total, 0 years.....	\$1,013,890	\$958,464	\$854,406	\$90,030
1929.....	97,043	.....	89,751	7,850
1930.....	106,710	.....	98,005	8,705
1931.....	130,101	13,812	100,189	10,100
1932.....	202,658	100,341	91,139	11,178
1933.....	207,712	118,744	77,879	11,089
1934.....	205,731	116,410	78,887	10,437
1935.....	218,782	130,601	77,350	10,832
1936.....	268,962	165,302	93,259	10,311
1937.....	476,564	323,174	142,025	10,305
Percent of total				
Total, 0 years.....	100.0	50.6	44.0	4.8
1929.....	100.0	.....	91.9	8.1
1930.....	100.0	.....	91.8	8.2
1931.....	100.0	10.6	81.6	7.8
1932.....	100.0	49.5	45.0	5.5
1933.....	100.0	57.2	37.5	5.3
1934.....	100.0	56.6	38.3	5.1
1935.....	100.0	59.7	35.4	4.9
1936.....	100.0	61.5	31.7	3.8
1937.....	100.0	68.0	29.9	2.1

In 1929 expenditures per inhabitant for all classes of relief amounted to \$3.53. In that year the entire burden was shouldered by agencies financed from State and local funds. In 1937 expenditures per inhabitant totaled \$21.76, of which considerably more than half was borne by the Federal Government. Federal expenditures for WPA earnings amounted to \$11.28. In addition, the Federal Government contributed in part to the rate of \$4.18 per inhabitant for the special types of public assistance.

### Complexity of Relief Administration

The growth of the relief bill in Cambridge in the past 9 years has been accompanied by increasing complexity in the administrative machinery for distributing relief. During 1937 relief was dispensed by local agencies supported solely from local funds; by a local agency supported from local and State funds; by a State agency supported from State and Federal funds; by a local agency supported from local, State, and Federal funds; and by local agencies supported wholly from Federal funds. Administratively, these agencies represent every type of organization from absolute local authority to complete Federal authority. From the point of view of John Doe, who is seeking help for his family, the hierarchy of agencies in this community of 118,000 must seem bewildering indeed.

If John Doe is out of work, and has exhausted his benefit rights under unemployment compensation, his first impulse will be to go to the WPA in search of a job. He may learn that he must first be certified as in need by the Board of Public Welfare. If no jobs are available, he may receive "dependent aid" from that agency. If John Doe has an aged parent whom he is unable to support, he will be referred to the Bureau of Old-Age Assistance in the Board of Public Welfare. If he is tuberculous and requires treatment in a sanitarium, his children may be taken care of through a grant for aid to dependent children. If he is a veteran, he may receive assistance from the Soldiers' Relief Department. If he loses his sight, he may receive aid from the Division for the Blind. If John Doe's wife is ill and he needs help in the management of his household affairs, the Family Welfare Society may assist him in the solution of his problems. It is a wise John Doe who knows where to turn for help in his particular situation. In his search, he may come to wonder whether the problems of the needy in a community the size of Cambridge could not be met successfully by fewer agencies. He may also ponder over the maze of regulations which determine the form and amount of assistance to be granted to him or his family.

### Cambridge Compared With 11 Massachusetts Cities

As a means of appraising the Cambridge relief situation, comparison has been made of annual relief expenditures in Cambridge and in 11 other

**Table 3.—Obligations incurred for public and private relief per inhabitant,<sup>1</sup> Cambridge, Mass., by years, 1929-37**

Year	Total per inhabitant	Public relief			Private general relief
		General relief	Special types of public assistance	CWA and WPA earnings	
Total, 0 years.....	\$114.76	\$60.17	\$10.85	\$25.01	\$5.83
1929.....	3.53	2.30	.60	.....	.31
1930.....	4.27	2.90	.94	.....	.37
1931.....	6.01	4.07	1.15	.....	.79
1932.....	11.07	7.71	1.78	.....	1.56
1933.....	11.83	7.82	1.83	1.10	1.08
1934.....	16.50	11.05	1.81	3.17	.47
1935.....	20.73	17.24	1.93	1.13	.43
1936.....	18.46	0.45	2.37	9.23	.41
1937.....	21.76	5.91	4.18	11.28	.39

<sup>1</sup> Based on United States population census, 1930.  
<sup>2</sup> CWA earnings. Includes earnings of administrative staff and all other persons employed on the program.  
<sup>3</sup> WPA earnings. Includes only earnings of workers certified as in need of relief.

**Table 4.—Total obligations incurred for relief, total obligations incurred per inhabitant, and obligations incurred for private relief as percentage of total, for 12 Massachusetts cities, 1929 and 1937**

City	Total obligations incurred		Percentage increase 1929 to 1937	Total obligations incurred per inhabitant <sup>1</sup>		Obligations incurred for private relief as percentage of total	
	1929	1937		1929	1937	1929	1937
Cambridge.....	\$401,072	\$2,473,371	517	\$3.53	\$21.76	8.8	1.8
Boston.....	3,263,830	29,270,522	797	4.18	37.48	10.5	3.3
Brockton.....	218,217	2,207,001	912	3.42	31.59	21.9	1.7
Fall River.....	322,219	2,961,633	820	2.80	25.60	7.7	1.1
Lawrence.....	201,417	1,550,613	692	2.37	18.70	6.4	1.0
Lowell.....	420,403	3,127,490	645	4.10	31.20	11.1	1.9
Lynn.....	252,389	2,691,765	968	2.47	26.31	17.8	1.5
Malden.....	120,172	1,237,519	932	2.07	21.32	1.1	-.1
New Bedford.....	389,017	2,587,893	565	3.46	22.98	4.0	-.7
Newton.....	70,220	912,095	1,203	1.08	13.97	12.8	2.7
Springfield.....	253,702	3,875,914	1,426	1.69	25.86	22.3	1.2
Worcester.....	546,270	4,455,035	721	2.80	22.06	9.2	1.1

<sup>1</sup> Based on United States population census, 1930.

Massachusetts cities which are also participating in the Social Security Board's study of urban relief trends. These cities are Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, Malden, New Bedford, Newton, Springfield, and Worcester. Like Cambridge, each of these cities presents a record of seriously mounting relief costs in the years from 1929 through 1937. The trend of total relief expenditures in the 12 cities is shown in chart II. The curves in this chart are plotted on a ratio scale and are comparable for rate of change in the volume of relief granted. They should not be compared for volume. The steeper the rise or fall in the curves, the greater the rate of increase or decrease in expenditures. Similar slopes represent similar rates of change. From 1929 through 1937, the annual relief bill for Cambridge increased 517 percent; the other cities show an even greater percentage increase in relief expenditures during this interval. Figures for individual cities are given in table 4.

Intercity comparisons of the volume of relief can best be made by means of rates to population.

In Cambridge in 1929, as has already been indicated, the relief burden amounted to \$3.53 per inhabitant. Only two cities, Boston and Lowell, had higher rates in that year. In 1937 Cambridge expenditures had risen to \$21.76 per inhabitant, but the rate was even higher in all the remaining cities except Lawrence, Malden, and Newton. The Boston rate was highest, amounting to \$37.48, and the Newton rate, only \$13.97, was lowest.

In all the cities, as in Cambridge, private funds are now financing a relatively small proportion of the total relief bill, although in absolute amounts private funds have not diminished in some cities. Relief from private funds in 1929 ranged from less than 1 percent to 22 percent of the total in the different cities; in 1937 private relief represented from 0.1 percent to 3.4 percent of the total. While some small amounts of private relief may not be represented in the reports, it is believed that the percentages would not be significantly affected by inclusion of such unreported relief.

#### *Need for Long-Range Planning*

From the comparisons which have been drawn, it may be concluded that the sharp rise in relief expenditures in Cambridge is not exceptional. Both in the State and in the Nation, the unprecedented unemployment of the 1930's has been accompanied by a rising tide of relief. In Cambridge, the peak in expenditures appears not yet to have been reached. Even with business recovery, there is no prospect that relief expenditures will return to anything approaching the 1929 pre-depression level. It is clear that large-scale relief spending will continue and that long-range planning is necessary to prevent and mitigate need. Developments in public-assistance and relief administration in recent years have resulted both in raising the standards of aid granted to needy families and in reaching a larger proportion of the population in need in Cambridge.