

General Assistance

General assistance is a term used to describe aid provided by State and local governments to needy individuals or families who do not qualify for major assistance programs and to those whose benefits from other assistance programs are insufficient to meet basic needs. In fact, general assistance is not usually known by that name, although both Maryland and Rhode Island call it “General Public Assistance”. More common is the term “General Relief”, but very different names are used in some jurisdictions. Thus New Jersey calls the program “State Aid”, Indiana uses “Township Poor Relief”, and Tennessee has three equivalent terms: “Poor Relief”, “Emergency Relief”, and “Paupers Relief”.

General assistance is often the only resource for individuals who cannot qualify for unemployment insurance, or whose ben-

efits are inadequate or exhausted. Help may either be in cash or in kind, including such assistance as groceries and rent.

The eligibility requirements and payment levels for general assistance vary from State to State, and often within a State. Payments are usually at lower levels and of shorter duration than those provided by federally financed programs. General assistance is administered and financed by State and local governments under their own guidelines.

General assistance*

Year	Average number (in thousands)	Total payment (in thousands)	Average amount of payments
1940	3,618	\$404,963	\$8.30
1950	866	298,262	22.25
1960	1,071	322,465	25.10
1970	957	618,319	53.82
1980	945	1,442,278	127.18
1990	1,220	NA	NA
1994	1,125	NA	NA

* Data partly estimated. Number of States reporting: 1960, 53; 1970, 45; 1980, 41; 1990, 37; 1994, 32.

In fiscal year 1994, 32 States, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands reported general assistance data to the Federal Government. About 1.1 million persons received general assistance.

In almost a fourth of the States, assistance was financed from local funds only.