



Homelessness in the USA

By Nancy Secrest



When you think of the homeless, whom do you see? Depending on your culture, you might visualise a street beggar, war zone refugees, scavengers in shanty towns, victims of earthquake, people in cardboard or mud huts – the images are endless.





The United States of America is certainly not the first country you might associate with homeless people. Around the world it is perceived as a land of bounty. Ask Americans whom they see when they think of the homeless, however, and plenty of images will spring to their minds: a middle-aged alcoholic or mentally challenged man, a woman pushing a grocery cart filled with bags of who knows what, or perhaps a desperate teenager – all Americans.



Homelessness is in fact a major problem in this country. Most of its victims are families. In fact 60 percent of all homeless are children. This I learned while working at Human Solutions, a nonprofit organisation in the city of Portland, Oregon that helps families avoid homelessness and helps to house those who are already homeless. I retired from Human Solutions in 2009, but still volunteer there. Agencies such as this are at work in all major cities and some smaller ones. They are always looking for volunteers to help.

The number of homeless children in the USA has surged in recent years to an all-time high, amounting to one child in every 30, according to a report issued in November 2014 by the National Center on Family Homelessness. It calculates that nearly 2.5 million American children were homeless at some point in 2013. This includes nearly 1.3 million children and youth who were identified as homeless by public schools. In reality there are more than that, though, as sometimes families stay in motels, temporarily with others, or in cars, and so are not quite as visible – the hidden homeless.



Why are these families homeless? For many people in America today, homelessness is just one paycheck away. What if you were suddenly made redundant from your job and you couldn't find another one soon enough to prevent eviction from your home? What if you or your spouse fell ill and couldn't work for a while and you didn't have extended, paid sick leave? Very few of us do. What if your car broke down and you couldn't get to work? Circumstances that might be a blip in the road to some are devastating to others.

I remember one such family. The company the father worked for reduced its staff and he lost his job. He found another, but was soon down-sized from that one as well. Then, he fell ill. Mom also worked and was able to hold it together for a little while until her job too was down-sized. It seemed they just couldn't get a break. At the same time doctor bills accumulated. Do you pay the doctor or the rent, and is there enough left for food? The family ended up being evicted from

their home. They were living in their car (which didn't do Dad's health any good) when they heard about our nonprofit organisation. They applied for help and were placed in our homeless shelter.

This gave the family a bit of stability. Dad concentrated on getting well, the children were able to go to a local school, and Mom worked with a social worker to find temporary rental assistance and a job. Before long, they were in permanent housing. Mom did find a job, and Dad followed suit as soon as he was well enough. What I remember most about this family is that at Christmas their names were put into a giving programme where they were 'adopted' by another family who provided gifts for the children and even something for Mom and Dad. The following year, I was working at the gift distribution centre when Mom, Dad and the kids all came in with big smiles on their faces and bags of presents for the family *they* had 'adopted'. Mom happily told how good it felt to be able to give back to another family in need what they had so generously been given the year before. There wasn't a dry eye in the place as she told her story.

In many homeless shelters around the country, families can stay in the shelter during the day only. At night folding beds or camp stretchers are provided by local churches at their facilities, and the families are transported to one church one night and another the next. These shelter networks, provided by compassionate and caring church members, give families safe and warm places to lay their heads at night. They are by far preferable to the alternative of sleeping in a car, a makeshift tent, or on the street. The service they provide is priceless.

Still, I wonder how it feels to be a child in this situation. How does it feel to a little one to be housed with a group of strangers? How does it feel to be bused to a different place every night before you can go to sleep? How do you concentrate on homework? How do you concentrate on anything when you know Mommy and/or Daddy are worried and distracted all the time? How does the lack of privacy feel to a teenager? Are they embarrassed about their family's situation? Do they try to hide it from their peers? Are they stressed out? And, remember, these are the lucky ones whose families have found shelter. Many homeless youth are not with their families, for whatever reason. They live on the streets and have more to worry about than loss of privacy or what their friends might think. Other families are homeless due to a parent's alcoholism, drug use, gambling addiction or mental health issues. In those cases, more help than housing is required, and the stress on the family, including the children, is increased. All of these children and youth face real harm, including negative emotional, educational and health outcomes. They are at high risk of physical and sexual abuse, trafficking and perhaps even suicide.

The TOS in America recently devoted an issue of its magazine, *For the Love of Life* (Winter 2015-2016) to the theme, "Children in Distress." The editorial team working under Ananya Sri Ram Rajan determined that, just as Barbara Hebert in her very fine article on child abuse stated, "We cannot turn a blind eye to the situations around the world in which children are suffering.

We must find the strength within us to look at the reality of our world and then use that strength to take action to alleviate suffering.” Barbara, who is the Vice-President of the Theosophical Society in America, is also the Director of a children’s advocacy centre – Hope House in Covington, Louisiana.



A number of our TOS members choose to make homelessness a top priority in their service work. Here we see a team preparing delicious vegetarian bag lunches for the homeless in Raleigh, North Carolina, USA.



Meals served to the homeless by TOS members in Wheaton, Il, USA

TOS member handing out a bag filled with toiletries and other useful items to a homeless man in a wheelchair

Is there a single country in the world without homeless citizens? Getting an accurate picture of global homelessness is very difficult. The international association, Habitat for Humanity, says that there are more than a billion people worldwide who do not have safe, secure and sustainable access to land for shelter.

The TOS encourages its members to involve themselves in projects to alleviate homelessness and welcomes reports on them. Please write to us! And now here are some smiling faces of homeless, abandoned or impoverished children around the world who have been helped by dedicated TOS groups:

TOS Sweden in neighbouring Latvia



TOS Ukraine



TOS India: 2004 tsunami victims

