

Berlin: A Grim Christmas for Many. Urban Poverty in Germany. Homelessness in the Inner City

By [Ernst Wolff](#)

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Winter exposes the social decline in Berlin more revealingly than any other season, especially around Christmastime. Bitter conditions drive the homeless into the inner city to seek shelter. Special “winter buses”, operated by aid agencies, search the streets, bridges and back courtyards to offer relief to the needy. The number of starving, freezing people increases outside the city’s soup kitchens.

“I never thought I’d be standing here”, says a man in his mid-fifties, as he joins the soup kitchen queue at the Berlin Zoo railway station. He lost his job five years ago and initially took on odd jobs, before finding himself no longer able to compete with younger low-wage workers.

“If you can’t keep up with the young’uns any more, you’re a goner”, he says bitterly, but resigned. A bystander of about the same age agrees, adding, “And then you have to fend for yourself. None of the public departments or authorities provides any help”.

A gaunt man in his early thirties pushes a shopping trolley full of plastic bags. At first he is reluctant to answer any questions and just shakes his head in resignation. Then he falteringly admits that he has been living on the street for the last two years, having previously lost his job and his home. “The worst of it is”, he mutters without looking up, “you’re dependent on charity for your survival”.

A pensioner in his early seventies, better dressed than most in the queue, has made a point of coming specially to the Zoo railway station from another part of the city. He wants to avoid the shame of being seen by a neighbor or a friend when he lines up at the food counter. “I’ve worked all my life, but now I have to make do with a pension of €810 a month”, he says indignantly. “How am I supposed to do that when my rent has increased again this year, and electricity and gas are getting more and more expensive?”

The difference between the rich and the poor is most striking on Berlin’s grand boulevard, the Kurfürstendamm, not far from the railway station. During the day, sheer penury drives many people into placing begging notices on the walls of buildings, and forces them to seek refuge from the freezing night wind by huddling in sleeping bags in shop entrances. At the same time, the posh stores, guarded by security personnel and radiating bright light, entice their affluent clientele with luxury products.

The Berlin Senate, which again this year has cited budgetary constraints to justify closing down or reducing services at district libraries, youth clubs and care centres for the elderly, has no concerns about economising when it comes to the Christmas lights on

Kurfürstendamm. Under a social democratic mayor, retail trade revenues take precedence over the misery of those who have to struggle for survival at the lower end of the social scale.

On a kiosk behind a young woman selling a newspaper for the homeless hangs a newspaper with the headline: "Almost one in five children lives in poverty". A study by the Joint Welfare Association shows that the number of poor people in Germany has increased by half a million over the last year. This means an additional 500,000 people who will have to survive each month on less than 60 percent of the average German income.

While many of the wealthy are crowding onto the "Ku'damm" and creating a distorted image of German society in general, the country's poverty reveals itself only in clusters on the outskirts of Berlin. No elaborate Christmas lighting and no Gucci, Armani or Louis Vuitton emporia are to be found in Spandau or Marzahn-Hellersdorf, where most of Berlin's Hartz IV welfare recipients live. These neighbourhoods constitute the abode of 60,000 of the 80,000 people who were ordered by the Berlin authorities last summer to move to new accommodation. This edict was forced upon them because the increased rents they had to pay exceeded the rate allowed for Hartz IV recipients.

Here live people like Monika, a 42-year-old single mother, who has to care for two children as well as a bedridden mother. Or like Jan, who moved away from home at 16 years of age, was denied a job with the firm where he served his apprenticeship as a mechatronics engineer, and had to return to living with his parents at 19, having unsuccessfully searched for a job for six months. Or the almost 80-year-old Juliane, who comes from Romania, has worked as a seamstress all her life, but has been denied a pension in Germany and only receives the miserly Hartz IV allowance because she lacks the necessary papers.

"Life is getting harder every year", says an elderly man who is taking a break at Lichterfelde railway station, after rummaging through bins and containers for empty bottles and buying himself a pack of cigarettes from the proceeds of the deposits. An outreach worker, who has been talking to two teenagers, agrees and adds: "But I get the feeling people won't be meekly putting up with this much longer". One of the youths loudly agrees with him: "The brazen way the rich grab everything for themselves and the way people like us here are treated is nauseating lots of other people, too, especially the younger ones".

Those around him nod in agreement, and while the young man angrily kicks at a paper bin, the social worker says: "No one speaks or writes about it yet, but there's one thing you can really sense here: The social climate is getting colder and people are getting angrier. Lots of tempers are seething and threatening to explode".

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