

US Housing Crisis Pushing Up Homelessness

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Every Christmas season a large electric star visible for miles is illuminated on a mountainside overlooking Bethlehem, Pa., to commemorate the time the holy family of Christianity took refuge in a manger on the night of Christ's birth.

This past Christmas, this city of 71,000—whose principal landmark is the rusting remains of the once thriving Bethlehem Steel Corporation—was unable to shelter its own growing number of homeless families from bitterly cold weather.

As in the New Testament account, there was no room at the inn for some and the city, citing “liability issues,” turned down requests to house the homeless on freezing nights in its jail or in the parking garage under City Hall.

“Here is what we are facing in the Lehigh Valley,” writes Marcie Lightwood, a social worker at Trinity Episcopal Church in the local *Morning Call*:

“Thousands of jobs have been lost in the past six months. When this happens, renters (and some homeowners) have two or three months before they get evicted. Then they may have another month or two of living in a vehicle (if they have one) or sofa surfing with friends and relatives. If they had foresight, they got on one of the waiting lists for one of the shelters, which are full...” The churches alone, she notes, can't do it all.

“We also have the chronically homeless, people whose income will never allow them to pay rent, who may have had mental illnesses, substance abuse or criminal histories.” And she warns many others “are fast approaching homelessness.”

Bethlehem is no isolated example. As Patrick Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless and reporter Lizzy Ratner write in the February 9 *The Nation* magazine, “Long before subprime mortgages, credit default swaps and the most recent stock market crash, the United States was in the grip of the longest period of sustained mass homelessness since the Great Depression.”

Even as George Bush's war of aggression forced 4-million Iraqis from their homes, triggering what the United Nations termed a “humanitarian crisis,” there were nearly as many Americans, 3.5-million, including 1.4 million children, “that experienced homelessness in the course of a year,” Markee observed. Surely, their plight also qualifies as an “humanitarian crisis,” yet public indifference left many, as in Bethlehem, to sleep in the cold.

“As people have lost their paychecks, or as the homes they were renting were foreclosed—most of today's homeless foreclosure victims are renters who were evicted, even though they paid rent, because their landlord had not kept up with the

mortgage—their tenuous grip on stability has slipped away,” Markee wrote.

Last year, 3.2-million foreclosures were filed nationally, the magazine said, and Markee predicts “the number of homeless families will likely continue to spike.”

According to the Los Angeles-based Institute For The Study of Homelessness and Poverty, Los Angeles leads the nation with 91,000 homeless, followed by New York City with 48,000, Detroit with 14,000; Houston with 12,000; and San Francisco, Atlanta, Chicago, and Philadelphia, all with about 6,000.

Markee traces the homeless surge back to the early days of President Reagan who “set about systematically dismantling federal housing programs, (and) slashing funds for federal rental vouchers and public housing. He also initiated the shift in federal low-income housing policy away from subsidized development to tax-credit programs, which fail to help the poorest families.”

And even as President George W. Bush “made a show of doling out small increases to the homeless services budget (though never enough to meet the need),” Markee writes, his administration “hacked away at public housing, Section 8 vouchers and other housing programs, undermining any attempt at reducing family homelessness.” The housing expert added that since 2004 funding for affordable housing programs declined by \$2.2 billion.

Bush’s mean-spirited Federal philosophy has been echoed nationally by cities that enacted laws to criminalize the homeless by arresting them for panhandling or even sitting, eating, and sleeping in public places. Some towns even ticket them for trivial offenses. “When you are giving out trespassing and jaywalking tickets to homeless people, it’s just harassment,” Linda Lera-Randle El, a homeless advocate in Las Vegas, Nev., told *The Review-Journal*.

Apparently, a good many people regard the homeless as drifters and bums. House The Homeless, an Austin, Tex.-based advocacy non-profit, however, found 38 percent of the Austin homeless are employed. “Presently, there are over one million minimum wage workers experiencing homelessness on an annual basis,” HH reports. “The current minimum wage structure does not elevate the minimum wage worker to a level where they can afford basic housing and other core necessities of life.”

Although a majority of the Austin’s 4,000 homeless are unemployed, 89.7 percent told HH that they want to work but gave health issues, disability, or inability to find work as barriers. Twenty-three percent said they are veterans.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition, with 40 other policy groups, is urging Congress to enact a \$45 billion proposal to create permanent housing with support services for the mentally ill and to provide housing vouchers or low-income housing to homeless families. According to *The Nation*, the plan calls for a minimum of 400,000 new rental vouchers as well as a \$10 billion infusion over two years in the recently created National Housing Trust Fund—“a move that would jump-start construction of badly needed low-cost homes.”

The plan also urges expanded aid for foreclosure victims, \$15.4 billion to upgrade and improve the energy efficiency of neglected public housing, and to devote \$2 billion to homelessness prevention. “Taken together, these initiatives will help more than 800,000 vulnerable households and create more than 200,000 jobs,” Markee writes.

“Cleaning up the wreckage of three decades of failed federal housing policy will take more

than one stimulus," he concludes, as "these measures are just the beginning of what's needed. But if change is the order of the day, dismantling the Reagan-Bush legacy of modern homelessness would be a promising way to start."

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