

## Editorial

# Homelessness: A Solvable Problem

**T**HE SHELTERS ARE FULL, transitional housing is very limited, and [so is] permanent housing that is affordable on local transportation routes." Such, according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors' recent survey of homelessness in 23 cities, is the bleak situation in Charleston, S.C. But what is true of Charleston is also true of many other cities in this, one of the richest countries in the world. Homelessness in the United States has been rising for over two decades. The survey's outlook section, moreover, predicts an increase in individual requests for emergency shelter in 2007.

While most people think of homelessness in terms of single men, roughly a third of the homeless population is made up of families, many of them headed by single parents. Families represent an especially vulnerable segment of the homeless population because of the presence of children. Advocates for the homeless point out that the disruption in the lives of children from living in shelters can lead to such health problems as respiratory and intestinal infections, along with psychological trauma. Their overall health status is far worse than that of children in homes. The trauma can be exacerbated when family members must separate upon entering shelters, with fathers and older male children often sent to shelters for men. Hardest of all is the fact that because of "lack of resources," 86 percent of families may be turned away. Little wonder that families have resorted to sleeping in cars, under bridges or in wooded areas.

Adding to the struggles of homeless people is a strong sentiment against them. This has led to municipal ordinances that punish homeless people primarily because they have no stable housing. Aimed at banishing them from public places, statutes of this kind prohibit begging, lying down, sitting or "loitering." Las Vegas offers an example. In July 2006 it passed an ordinance that makes sharing food with destitute or homeless people in public places a crime. Violation of the statute can be punishable by up to six months in jail. Nevada's A.C.L.U. has filed a federal suit against Las Vegas, claiming that the ordinance violates the constitutional right to free assembly and free speech.

What causes homelessness? A majority of the survey cities name as the number one cause not the shortage of affordable housing (that is number two), but mental illness

and the lack of related supportive services. Resources for therapeutic treatment are often unavailable. An advocacy group in Baltimore told **America** that although it was once relatively easy for them to refer homeless individuals to a local mental institution that often accepted them the very day of the referral, the situation has changed. "Now," said a spokesperson, "they might just give the person a prescription for medication and say, 'Be on your way.'"

**SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND LACK OF WORK** that pays enough to cover housing costs are other major causes of homelessness cited in the survey. Some individuals in shelters are employed, but do not earn enough to cover rent. Many low-wage workers must spend the bulk of their earnings for that purpose; little remains for other necessities. And yet according to HUD, no more than 30 percent of a person's income should be used for rent. Rising rental costs often push people to the brink of homelessness—a circumstance highlighted in *Out of Reach*, the National Low Income Housing Coalition's own recent survey. It notes that in no part of the country is it possible for minimum-wage earners to rent a one-bedroom apartment at the fair market rate. In fact, the report states, a family must earn over \$28,000 to afford such an apartment—"substantially more than what a household with two full-time workers earning the minimum wage earns in a year."

Homelessness is a solvable national problem, but the needed resources have not been forthcoming from the federal government. True, the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 remains a significant help. Sheila Crowley, the N.L.I.H.C.'s president, told **America** that though funding is available to maintain the act's current programs, "it is insufficient to meet the existing need." The unmet demand for affordable housing, along with important accompanying social services that are seldom available, stand as harsh barriers to ending homelessness. The promise of the Housing Act of 1949—"a decent home...for every American family"—remains unfulfilled. Meanwhile, the Congressional Budget Office reports that income inequality continues to widen, with incomes of the most affluent rising faster than those of other groups, even as the administration's 2008 budget includes cuts in programs aimed at helping the poorest.

