

Homeless 'out there' closer than you think

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City officials moved the homeless out of the shantytown behind the Sun building, under the Jones Falls Expressway along Guilford Avenue. For several months, the number of tents and makeshift huts gradually increased there, and you could see signs of the homeless at campsites along the Fallsway, too. They've been in the park by St. Vincent de Paul Church for a long time now, even after the repaving of Fayette Street, from President Street to Broadway, gave it the look of Le Grande Boulevard.

We see all of this out of the corners of our eyes, and those of us who are busy and better off make assumptions: The homeless are mentally ill or addicted to drugs. Certainly rational men and women would not sleep under sticks and tarp.

But there are a lot of reasons for homelessness, starting with one stated succinctly one fine day by Esther Reaves, doyenne of poverty workers and director of the Manna House soup kitchen in midtown: "They're poor."

What's that?

"They're poor," Reaves said again.

Right. Poverty.

We did a pretty good job, starting with that folksy phony Bill Clinton, of wiping out "welfare as we know it," and the employment numbers across the country continue to look good. But we haven't exactly zapped poverty.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 36.5 million people were in poverty in 2006. That's a bit more than 12 percent of the population, much lower than the rate of poverty that persisted in this country from the 1960s, when the so-called War on Poverty commenced, through the Reagan "Morning In America" years, and into the start of the 21st century.

But here's what always makes me check my optimism about reports of declining numbers of poor (even in Maryland, now the wealthiest state in the nation, with one of the lowest poverty rates): The Census Bureau considers a person poor if he makes under \$10,488 a year. (That's for men and women under 65; for those over 65, the threshold is \$9,699.) For a family of four, poverty is a household income of \$20,444 or less.

That's \$393 a week.

Imagine trying to get by on that.

Imagine trying to get by on, say, \$480 a week. That's what a family of four living on \$25,000 a year would have, and they would not be considered in the official poverty count.

Add this to the equation, also from the Census Bureau: The number of people without health insurance coverage rose from 44.8 million (15.3 percent) in 2005 to 47 million (15.8 percent) in 2006.

"Mental illness and addiction are prevalent among people who are experiencing homelessness," says Adam Schneider, an outreach worker with Health Care for the Homeless. "But homelessness is fundamentally a symptom of poverty. And homelessness isn't good for anyone's health -- somatic, mental or behavioral. It causes health problems and significantly complicates treatment.

"We need to ensure that there is an adequate supply of affordable housing at every income level, that people's incomes are livable, and that comprehensive health care is available to all."

Homelessness is seen by too many as a city problem, with Baltimore's wealthier surrounding counties having little interest in sharing the burden by creating affordable or public housing opportunities.

So we have a persistent housing crisis affecting families who live in poverty or right at its threshold, or those who have chronic health issues or disabilities that leave them economically powerless.

I received a letter Friday from a woman named Leanna. She lives in the Brooklyn section of Baltimore, near the Anne Arundel County line.

"I am legally disabled. My income comes from SSI and TCA," she wrote, referring to the federal program for disability assistance and Maryland's Temporary Cash Assistance program. The maximum monthly SSI benefit is \$623 a month. The amount of TCA is limited and depends on income before taxes and the number of children in a family. (Someone who receives TCA could also be eligible for food stamps.)

"I was paying \$650 a month for a crappy house. Now my landlord raised it to \$800 a month for a still-crappy house," Leanna wrote. "With my rent so high, I can't pay bills or afford to get anything but necessities. So we are always waiting for BGE to come turn off our electric.

"I have applied for [public] housing in both the city and A.A. County. I have never heard even an acknowledgment. ... I desperately need help with the bills. My daughter just turned 18 and she's out looking for jobs. ... But even with her working two jobs, it should still take months to get caught up.

"They raise the taxes, they raise the cost of living, they raise gas and electric. But why can't people who could really use a boost get some help?"

"I don't have a car or a phone line or the Internet, or expensive video games. Hell, we don't even have coats.

"But I'm not complaining," Leanna added. "I know there's a lot of people out there worse off than me."

True. Others "out there" are actually homeless. But there isn't much between Leanna and the sticks and tarp.

It's not just mental illness or drug addiction or alcoholism that creates homelessness. It is persistent poverty, or near-poverty, and circumstance -- one increase in rent, one spell of poor health, one stretch of unemployment -- that leaves many more of our fellow citizens vulnerable and at the margins, beyond the record of the census takers and beyond the corners of our eyes.

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