

Dickensian conditions in Canada

# Homeless mother could be jailed for leaving baby at Toronto City Hall

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A terrible social tragedy caught the attention of millions of ordinary people in the Toronto area last week. In a shameful display of callousness, the police and city authorities charged a 41-year-old homeless woman with child abandonment and failing to provide the necessities of life for her baby.

The prosecution followed a passerby's discovery of a newborn baby girl in a freezing cold stairwell at Toronto's city hall in Nathan Phillips Square on January 25. She had been left there for someone to find, covered only by a bloodied blanket and with her umbilical cord still attached.

The infant was placed in the care of medical staff at the Hospital for Sick Children and named Mira, or "Miracle," for surviving despite the tragic circumstances of her birth. She was born underweight at four pounds, nine ounces and one or two weeks premature. Temperatures in Toronto had consistently dropped below minus 20 degrees Celsius (minus 4 Fahrenheit) that week.

Although in obvious distress, the charged woman was forced to undergo DNA tests to verify maternity, and to appear in front of the media at Old City Hall court, where a psychiatric assessment was ordered. She was held in custody for five days before being released on bail. If convicted, she could be imprisoned for up to two years.

Canadian newspapers have reported uncritically that the Children's Aid Society is applying for permanent custody of the baby, so she can be cared for by foster parents and eventually adopted. No one in the media has raised even the slimmest possibility of the mother and baby being reunited and provided with adequate care and support services.

Yet a picture is emerging of a mentally ill woman who has been unable to obtain adequate support or services for many years. Abandoned and persecuted by authorities, she was left to give birth on the street, only to be treated as a criminal. One can only begin to imagine the fear and confusion she has endured throughout her arrest and confinement in a cell.

Workers at the Fred Victor Centre, a downtown shelter, reported that the woman, who has spent most of her adult life in and out of shelters, walked into the bustling building on the afternoon of January 25, exhausted and in pain from labor. Police took her to St. Michael's Hospital for treatment and then placed her under arrest.

A friend, a resident of the Fred Victor Centre, reported that the woman would come to the center for meals but spent most of her time living on the streets just outside city hall. "She didn't trust many people and she didn't want to go into a shelter."

A further report described how the woman had met and befriended the man thought to be the father of the child, four years ago at a

United Church Shelter. The man is also homeless and the couple loved to take long walks through Toronto, the woman clutching her red and blue sleeping bag, which he gave her, and garbage bags containing the rest of her belongings.

Interviewed by a journalist, the man explained that he was the son of a carpenter and attended a school for "slow learners" but could not read or write. Whenever they could afford it, the couple would go to a motel. The last occasion had been before Christmas. The motel room had been a luxury to them, with a fridge, cable television, king-sized bed and hot showers.

The man said the woman had denied being pregnant when he had asked her why she was growing big. He attended the offices of the Children's Aid Society this week upon hearing news of the birth, in the hope of seeing the baby. Instead, he was questioned about the woman and asked to leave.

By contrast to the official response, people from across Ontario have flooded the Children's Aid Society with offers to adopt the baby and with donations of money, food and clothing. Many have also expressed outrage at the woman's treatment.

One letter to the *Toronto Star* commented: "Charles Dickens wrote many years ago about women giving birth outside of workhouses, in fields or even on the streets.... These women were poor, mostly uneducated, abandoned by their families and society and some were mentally ill. Whatever their circumstances these women shared a common theme of terror that most of us cannot comprehend, even though it still exists today. Decades later, is Mira's mother so different?"

Another letter writer suggested prosecuting the provincial and city politicians. "If abandonment charges need to be laid, it is against the members of a provincial government who in less than eight years have demolished social assistance, totally undermined women's services, reduced public health care and education in Ontario to a moribund shadow of their former selves and created an unprecedented crisis of homelessness in our cities. Charges should also be considered against members of Toronto's City Council for gross negligence in terms of maintaining a woefully inadequate, unsafe emergency shelter system and for not showing any initiative at all in terms of creating more permanent housing. With city-funded and run services for homeless people being reduced on a seemingly daily basis, we can reasonably expect to see many more 'Miras' in the future."

Mira is far from the first baby whose fate has shocked Toronto residents. In 1997, Jordan Heikamp died of starvation in a city shelter at five weeks, weighing four pounds two ounces less than he had at

birth. After a coroner's inquest, a committee recommended a shelter/housing project for young homeless parents. It would have been a minimal facility, with just 50 units, costing \$6 million to build \$1 million per year to operate. But the federal, provincial and city authorities failed to provide the funding.

Politicians and officials can hardly claim ignorance of the worsening homelessness crisis. Two decades ago, it was rare to see someone sleeping out on Toronto's streets, but today homeless people and beggars can be found across the downtown area. One *Toronto Star* article this week complained that the "misery has become a permanent stain on downtown streets."

In 1998, a report prepared for city Mayor Mel Lastman revealed some of the devastating consequences of the preceding decade of government cutbacks to welfare and housing services. The task force was concerned to clean up the city's image from the standpoint of attracting investors. But even so, its 105 recommendations have been largely ignored.

Staff from shelters in downtown Toronto report being overwhelmed with demand for services. Due to the lack of affordable public and private housing, and inadequate support and health services, the city's Community Information Helpline received over 91,000 calls for assistance in 2000. The city's shelters have about 4,000 beds.

Official statistics indicate that 300 homeless women in Toronto give birth each year. The true figure may be higher because many women, like Mira's mother, avoid the shelters. A staff member at one of the larger women's services explained that shelters often do not take account of an individual's psychological, social, and cultural needs. Women fleeing violence and immigrant women in particular often fail to obtain support.

Toronto's mental health services were "deinstitutionalized" in the 1960s and again in the 1980s without adequate community health facilities. The mentally ill were usually placed in substandard boarding houses near hospitals, with disastrous consequences. People moved onto the streets and into shelters in large numbers.

Those seeking help face appalling delays. Ontario Federation of Community Mental Health and Addictions Programs executive director David Kelly told a news conference that most of his federation's 216 member agencies have long waiting lists for services. Kelly reported it takes four months just to get assessed for a placement in an addictions program. Between 50 percent and 80 percent of hostel users suffer from mental illness, and/or struggle with drug and alcohol addictions.

The typical profile of homelessness, however, has been steadily changing over the past two decades. Families and youth are the fastest growing group of shelter users. By 1996, families represented 46 percent of all shelter residents. The number of children living in homeless shelters jumped by 130 percent, from approximately 2,700 in 1988 to 6,200 in 1999. Families with children can spend years living in shelters because there is no affordable housing.

Most of the children living in shelters are very young. One-third of them are younger than four. More than half are school-age children, between 5 and 14 years of age. The detrimental impacts on children of residing in an institution for long periods include damage to developmental, psychological and social growth, poorer health and nutrition and academic difficulties.

Across Toronto, more than 100,000 people are on waiting lists for public or social housing, with over 1,400 new applications lodged each month. Because no public housing has been built since 1995, applicants wait between 10 and 15 years for accommodation.

In Toronto's private rental market, family apartments average \$1,000 to \$1,200 per month. Families on low incomes or dependent on welfare cannot afford these rents. Legal minimum wages have been frozen at \$6.85 per hour since 1995, well below the official poverty line.

Each of Canada's main political parties is directly responsible for these conditions. During the early 1990s, the federal Liberals began handing housing and other social programs to the provinces, and in Ontario the New Democratic Party (NDP) government of Bob Rae implemented the cuts.

The NDP paved the way for the Ontario Tories to sweep into office in 1995. Under Mike Harris, the Conservatives slashed welfare rates by more than 20 percent, drove people off benefits, imposed a minimum wage freeze and ended capital expenditure on public housing.

When working class opposition to the Conservatives' program erupted in strike waves by public servants and teachers in 1996-97, the NDP and trade union leadership stifled the resistance.

The city council is equally culpable, having fallen completely into line with this social assault. News of Mira's plight has not stopped the council from continuing with moves, backed by one of its long-serving members, Jack Layton—who was recently elected national NDP leader—to disperse shelters across the city and into the suburbs where support services are largely nonexistent.

Only last month, the city evicted the last residents of StreetCity, an old warehouse that once provided accommodation for 72 homeless people. StreetCity, established in 1988, was meant to be a temporary home, pending the construction of a community for 12,000 people on derelict industrial land. The larger project, promised following the 1987 United Nations Year of Housing for the Homeless, was axed by the Rae NDP government in 1992.

The case of little Mira and her mother is an indictment of the entire political establishment and of capitalism itself. In 2003, in one of the world's richest cities, the most vulnerable members of society, the disabled, poor and unemployed, are once more subjected to the same cruelties and injustices that existed two centuries ago, in Dickens' London.



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