

Tent camp reveals social inequality in Ann Arbor, Michigan

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Last week, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team visited Camp Take Notice, a homeless encampment in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to speak with residents and document conditions. The tent camp is home to about 35 people. It is located on a small triangle of wooded land, lined on two sides by a freeway and on a third by a narrow county road.

A steep, icy trail next to one of the freeway overpasses leads to the camp. This treacherous route is the only way supplies, donations, residents and visitors can enter. The collection of tents, tarps and small shacks that constitute the residents' only shelter is hidden from view behind brush and pine trees and is undetectable from the road.

When the reporting team arrived at the camp at 9:30 in the morning, the temperature was in the mid-20s (Fahrenheit) and about three inches of snow covered the ground. Many of the residents were still in their tents but a few were gathered in the camp's common tent around a wood-burning stove. Several residents spoke to the WSWs about their life at the camp and the circumstances that had brought them there. Their stories paint a devastating portrait of the social insecurity faced by millions in the United States.

Rick, 50, who asked not to be photographed, explained that he was a plumber until 2008, when the construction industry collapsed. After this devastating decline in his income, Rick fell behind on his child support payments for his two sons and was jailed as a result in 2010. In August, realizing his bleak job prospects and wary of being a burden to his family, Rick decided to come to Ann Arbor to live at the camp. He began by riding his bike from his home in Gladwin, Michigan to Ann Arbor, a distance of 150 miles. After his bike broke down, he hitchhiked the rest of the way. Rick said he came to Ann Arbor because it was "the best city of opportunity in the whole state."

In the past four years, Rick says he has gone "from people calling me for jobs, then nothing for stretches of three months at a time." He has found only intermittent work in Ann Arbor, and brief work at an auto plant just before it shut down. Rick, whose father, grandfather, and great grandfather all worked in the auto industry, said he was hired in under false pretenses. "They took our union dues but the plant was never rehired," he said.

Jocelyn, 40, was a home health aide until she was severely injured in a car accident in 2005. She tried to get back into the labor market through a program called WorkFirst, but, she said, "So many need but only so many can get in. One flaw knocks it off for you." The stigma of having a felony on a person's record, she explained, can prevent someone from securing even a low-skill job because the standard applications include questions about a person's record. "They need to take that off there," Jocelyn said. "We do our time and get out."

Jocelyn's difficulties multiplied when the four-bedroom home she owned with her wife in Romulus, Michigan was foreclosed in 2010. Her relationship with her partner, who is a veteran with multiple sclerosis, quickly deteriorated. "Everything went down the drain," she said. "I lost my home. I was separated due to finances, stress, and bills. So we all separated and I lost my family."

As Jocelyn gave the reporting team a tour of the camp, she described what it was like to live with no running water or bathroom facilities. "I didn't go to the bathroom for five days when I got here and got sick." She said she was also scared to sleep at first because the propane tanks used to heat the tents can explode in a fire. Residents keep extra tanks within their tents instead of outside where they can be stolen.

"People do get hurt at camp," she said, while explaining the difficulty of sleeping next to the heaters at night. Jocelyn said she has burns all over her hands from the tanks and burning logs. Other residents also reported similar injuries as well as breathing problems, including bronchitis, from the damp conditions and wood smoke.

Alanna, 23, who has been at the camp for two weeks, said that she and her fiancé had black mold in their first tent, which was not at this site. "It was poorly taken care of," she said. "We were literally rubbing our faces every night. I'm still coughing since October."

The reporting team observed little food at the camp, except for some canned fruit and spices stored in the main tent, and the can of tuna Rick ate while speaking with us. Jocelyn added, "Food is difficult to come by around here. Churches bring some but we haven't had much." Jocelyn and some of the other residents have state food assistance but many do not.

"This is just ridiculous," Alanna said. "When I was in school, no

one taught me how to bank, how to do anything for housing. They teach sex ed but not how to live. I graduated from high school and tried to go to WCC [community college], but I hurt my back and now I can't re-enroll because I owe \$1,200 and can't get financial aid. I have no felonies. I could be on top of the world if I had a chance!

"If you need experience to get a job, and you can't get a job to get experience, then what are you supposed to do? I want to go back to school so bad, so bad. I want to be a cosmetologist, a social worker, or a nurse, but I'm stuck and don't know how to get out."

Grit is also a resident of the camp and a veteran. He now works as a street vendor of Groundcover News, a relatively new newspaper published in Ann Arbor that features stories of and by the homeless. Formerly a Ford worker, Grit said his mom, dad, sisters, and uncles all worked for Ford, and he can show Ford pay stubs in his family going back to the 1930s.

Jocelyn said she was surprised when she came to the camp because so many of the homeless here are "younger and straighter than the stereotypical bum." Alanna agreed and said, "Most people think that people become homeless because they're drug addicts and alcoholics. Not true. They become that or worsen after becoming homeless." Many residents also discussed the prevalence of various mental or physical disabilities that prevent residents from being able to get and keep jobs. Alcohol and drugs are not allowed on the campsite and no one under 18 is allowed to live at the camp.

When asked if there was crime at the camp, one of the residents replied, "Stealing is really big down here. I've had my tent broken into." She said that when donations come, they are oftentimes dropped off without notice so hoarding occurs and not everyone receives a share. The residents also reported that the camp's three electric saws were recently stolen. As a result, "everybody's been chopping" wood for the community stove. Extra clothes are kept in an office tent for residents to take as needed. Within that tent, medication and a first aid kit were also recently stolen.

As the residents and reporting team toured the camp, new vandalism of the locked wood structure housing the generator was discovered. Grit said, "Winter brings out the worst in people." The generator was already recently fixed after a previous act of vandalism that had disabled it for two weeks. It is used mostly to charge cell phones, play music, cut firewood, and for lighting. "It's so hard without electric," Jocelyn said.

Ann Arbor has a population of approximately 114,000 and a median household income of \$52,711, which is slightly above the national average. The city is home to the University of Michigan, which is ranked one of the top 20 universities in the world and is the largest employer in the county, employing roughly 30,000 workers, including 12,000 at its medical center. The university has an endowment of \$7.8 billion, and spent \$1.24 billion on research last year alone. In 2010, the university spent \$226 million to renovate its football stadium to become the largest stadium in North America.

The list of rankings and accolades for Ann Arbor runs pages, and new achievements are added regularly. This week Ann Arbor was selected by Kiplinger's Personal Finance as the "Best City in the

Country for Singles." It commonly tops 'best of' lists, and was recently included in the following: "Best Cities in America to Find a Job," "Top Ten Turnaround Towns—Midwest," "10 Most Educated Cities," "10 Most Affordable Places to Live" and "10 Great Cities for Raising Families."

Despite the seeming stability and relative prosperity of the city, especially when compared to the economic devastation experienced elsewhere in Michigan, the number of people in Ann Arbor who fell below the poverty line for the 2010 Census was 20 percent, 6 percentage points higher than the national average, and 5 percentage points higher than the state as a whole. This is an increase in poverty of about 5 percent since the 2000 Census.

In 2009, the Washtenaw Housing Alliance conducted a "point in time" physical count of homeless adults staying either in shelters or outside and found 197 people living in this condition. According to a January 2012 shelter count conducted by the Shelter Association of Washtenaw County, there were 75 individuals in shelter beds and 25 men in "rotation," a winter program for the sober where 25 men go to a church, with the churches rotating the men one week at a time. Additionally, 35 individuals spent the night in the warming center, which is essentially sleeping in a chair instead of a bed at the shelter. This can cause health complications associated with swelling in the feet and legs.

While she could provide no definitive figures for current counts, in a recent interview Shelter Association CEO Ellen Schulmeister said that since 2008 she has seen an approximately 50-60 percent increase in services. With such increases, based on the 2009 figure of 197 homeless, the current total number of homeless in Washtenaw County can conservatively be projected to be between 250 and 300.

Schulmeister said, "It takes time to filter down. If you have a foreclosure or something like that, people pick up on other resources they have, so it takes a while to hit the shelters. You don't see it immediately in the numbers. I don't know if we've peaked." Asked if the shelter recommends Camp Take Notice as an option to people once the shelter reaches its nightly capacity, Schulmeister said, "We find friends and families or other shelters. As a last resort, we'll let them know about the camp."

Camp Take Notice is the only organized tent camp in Michigan, one of 19 such camps in the United States. It is supported by a 501©3 non-profit organization, but residents reported many other informal camps. When Alanna and her fiancé lost their apartment several months ago, she said they camped alone before moving to Take Notice.

"My family has been in low poverty since I was born," Alanna said. "My mom took care of me and my twin brother. Low Medicaid and high rent always led us back down. All those foreclosures while they give trillions to the banks. The system's screwed up, that's for sure."



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