

Homelessness, social misery on the rise in US capital

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As the impact of the economic crisis on working class families deepens, millions across the country are confronting the threats of foreclosure, bankruptcy, and homelessness. Those who fall through the cracks of society are being met with attacks on safety net programs at every level of government. The budgetary assault is accompanied by legislation aimed at criminalizing the poor, such as drug testing for welfare and food aid, laws against panhandling and homeless encampments, and aggressive use of child protective services against families who fall on hard times.

The nation's capital—long crippled by high housing costs, a huge wave of foreclosures, and double digit unemployment across much of the city—has seen a sharp rise in homelessness. Family homelessness has spiked by 74 percent since the onset of the recession in 2008. A recent report from the *Washington Post* throws light on the effort by the city to suppress requests by struggling families for help.

The *Post* reported cases of homeless families seeking assistance from shelters in the District of Columbia who were threatened by the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) to be investigated for neglect should they not find a place to stay. The CFSA has the legal power to remove children from the care of their parents in cases of neglect and place them into foster homes.

"I was afraid that my kids would be taken from me just because I can't afford to live in DC," single mother Shakieta Smith told the *Post*. Smith had called the city hotline in March and was told that every DC shelter was full. The representative then told Smith, the *Post* stated, "If she and her kids had nowhere safe to sleep, she'd be reported to [CFSA] for a possible investigation into abuse and neglect." Smith, a 25-year-old hairdresser, told the paper, "It's not like I'm abusive or none of that. I ran into a situation where I don't have

no place to go."

The article, entitled "Heart-wrenching' Catch-22", cites her story and of others in similar positions living with friends and family or staying in motels, afraid to send their children to school in the event their children might be discovered by authorities and taken from them. As of June, 32 families had been reported to the CFSA.

"These people are simply walking in the door for assistance and people don't have shelter and they're saying, 'We're calling CPS on you? ' It's ridiculous," said Ruth Ann White, the executive director of the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare. White suggested that DC officials were deliberately scaring away parents with the warning. "It is scandalous," she said. "I've never seen it done this blatantly."

Mindy Good of the CFSA insisted that although being homeless in itself does not constitute a "sufficient reason" to declare parents neglectful, it does occur. "I'm sorry that people view the child welfare system as a threat rather than a safety net," she told the *Post*. "But yes, this is a reality."

Homeless advocates began first hearing about such instances last winter, and expressed concern that now many families are hesitant to seek help, fearing the response from authorities will inflict harm, rather than help. "It is an outrage that it's happening" stated Patty Mullaly Fugere of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless.

Though it is stated that shelter employees did this as a last resort in order to ensure children's safety, the result of such actions are to effectively vilify the poor.

Long-lasting poverty can have detrimental effects on families. "I don't think a hotel is a good place to raise a family—you're in one room" said Charmaine Walton, whose 4-year-old daughter and her had been forced to

move to a motel after Walton had lost her job a year ago. Families who at earlier times would remain inside the shelter for 6 months would now remain for a year or more, according to statements from The Washington DC General Hospital, the cities' main shelter.

While in the past year homelessness in the region officially only recorded a 1 percent rise, families making up the total percentage have risen by 23 percent. Some 3,340 children were recorded among DC's homeless population. Figures on the homeless have skyrocketed in the district in the past 4 years, rising to nearly 12,000 individuals, 5,611 of which are in families.

The city has recently reported there is to be a \$7 million shortfall in its budget for services dedicated to fighting homelessness. This comes despite the fact the city itself has reported a \$240 million surplus.

In the outlying suburbs of the district, poverty and homelessness has also increased. In Loudoun County, one of the nation's richest with an annual household median income of \$119,000, instances of homelessness have risen 5 percent. "People are struggling everywhere" stated Vickie Koth of the Good Shepherds Alliance.

Judith Dittman, executive director of Alternative House, the only emergency shelter for homeless teens in Northern Virginia said in a recent statement: "There is talk about another recession, but for the young people we work with, the recession never stopped. It never stopped for the moms and kids in our community-based programs. They still don't have enough to eat. They are struggling to find shoes as their kids grow out of them. We are distributing more food than ever before."

The amount of social infrastructure within the district and outlying regions has been subjected to continual cuts in recent years. The DC Fiscal Policy Institute recently reported that in the period from 2000-2008, homes with rents costing less than \$750 per month decreased from 65,000 units to only 49,000. In the same period homes with rents higher than \$1,500 increased from 12,000 units to nearly 30,000.(See, "Widening social inequality in US capital")

In roughly the same period, the district's core budget for housing in the district was almost halved, starting at \$123 million in 2004 and ending up with only \$64 in 2010.

Earlier this year, the cities' transit authority introduced plans to balance a \$116 million budget shortfall on the backs of residents by introducing fare hikes for transportation services. Predicted to generate over half the required funds needed, the hikes would have raised prices for people paying cash on city buses by 30 cents as well as raising the fees for shuttle services, a program benefiting the disabled, by 40 cents.

Last year, it was reported in the *Washington Post* that an emergency law passed in 2010, believed to have eliminated discrepancies between the amount of child support funds given to legal guardians and adoptive parents in the district had only applied to those applying after May 7 of 2010. This meant many older youth in foster services would be dropped from the subsidies at 18. Many youth advocates have stated that few children with troubled backgrounds are ready for financial independence immediately upon reaching adult age.

The resulting decrease in payment to guardians and foster parents placed increasing strain on families attempting to support children in need, and was cited as a disincentive for families who might have wished to provide a home for troubled youth.



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