

INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES  
COMMENTARY



# Hardship in the midst of plenty

Philip Alston

***Throughout history, homelessness has been a haunting human fear. In every century, disasters, whether the result of human actions or of nature, have left behind troops of wanderers: men, women and children with no space to claim as their own. While it might be tempting to assume that homelessness is tied to a specific catastrophic event such as war or famine, today it is a stark reality in some of the world's wealthiest countries.***

**M**any people living in the industrialized world have no place to sleep tonight, had no place last night and will have no place tomorrow night. In their dozens or hundreds or thousands, they drift along the streets of large, prosperous cities, often with babies in their arms, seeking warmth, safety and stability that are increasingly hard for them to find.

Several studies show the extent of the homelessness problem. For example, it is estimated that there are about 3 million people in the 15 countries of the European Union who do not have a permanent home. While Germany does not survey homelessness, a non-governmental organization estimated that more than 850,000 people were home-

less in the country, of whom only a third were immigrants.

However, the problem is not limited to the European Union: On any given night, three quarters of a million people in the United States are homeless; in Toronto, Canada's largest city, 6,500 people stayed in emergency shelters on a typical night in late 1997, a two-thirds increase in just one year.

Because they are, on average, poorer than men, women can wind up on the streets. If she is on her own, if she heads a family or is trying desperately to escape from violence and abuse in her own home, a woman faces especially grim prospects. For example, it is estimated that in the United Kingdom, almost half of working women do not earn enough to afford the rent on even a one-bedroom unit. In the United

States, women head about one third of all families, but half of all impoverished families.

Furthermore, an 11-city survey carried out in the United States shows that, on average, the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment would require hourly wages of \$10.73 — more than twice the current minimum wage of \$5.15 — assuming one third of income is allocated to rent. And it is women who are over-represented in precisely the low-status, service-sector jobs that pay minimum wage.

While there are few statistics on the homeless — in censustaking they often, quite literally, don't count — many of the documented homeless are children, including the very young. In the United States in 1996, 5.5 million children were living in poverty, and it is reasonable to surmise that a goodly number of them were relegated to the streets.

The German study referred to earlier showed that a third of the homeless were children or adolescents, while estimates suggest that almost 250,000 young people between 16 and 24 became homeless in the United Kingdom within a single year, 1995.

In Australia, an estimated 21,000 young people between the ages of 12 and 18 are homeless at any one time.

And in the past 20 years, in many industrialized countries, the number of single-parent, especially mother-led, families has increased, with a large per-

centage living below the poverty line, particularly in Australia, Canada and the United States.

According to article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development." By its nature, homelessness denies every one of those rights.

Homeless young people are twice as likely as others to suffer from such chronic diseases as respiratory or ear infections, gastrointestinal disorders and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. In the United States, a homeless girl in her early teens is 14 times more likely to become pregnant than a girl with a home. In Belgium, half of the homeless people in shelters had dropped out of school during or immediately after primary school. In Germany, 8 of 10 homeless people living in shelters completed only primary education or had no schooling at all, while in Luxembourg, the figure is 9 out of 10.

Rather than enjoying the right to "a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development," children on the street suffer from the cumulative effects of poverty, hunger, family breakdown, social isolation and, very often, violence and abuse. On their own before they have the opportunity to develop personal identities or to mature, without

Philip Alston has served since 1991 as Chairperson of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Mr. Alston is also Chairperson of the Meeting of Chairpersons of the six UN expert bodies responsible for supervising the major human rights treaties. In addition, he is Director of a major project to draft a proposed Human Rights Agenda for the European Union for the New Millennium. Mr. Alston is Professor of International Law and Head of the Law Department at the European University Institute in Florence (Italy).

# INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES

## COMMENTARY

the stability required for self-confidence, or the skills and education needed to cope in the world, they are immensely vulnerable to enticement into prostitution, drug use and various forms of criminal behaviour. Sometimes, these are the only ways they can hope to survive. Moreover, often lacking experience with trustworthy adults, teenagers on their own can perceive offers of help as attempts to capture and hold them, and they may reject the very services they need most.

Many see only one way out: A 1995 national study in the United States found that 26 per cent of young people in emergency shelters and 32 per cent of those on the street had made at least one suicide attempt.

All this is happening at the same time that the industrialized world has been reaching dazzling levels of economic prosperity: The per capita gross national product of 12 industrialized countries more than doubled between just 1980 and 1995.

Within industrialized countries, there are increasing concentrations of wealth and want, as economies split between well-educated, highly paid professionals and entrepreneurs, and the socially, politically and economically disenfranchised. The latter are then seen as victims of 'collateral damage', the unfortunate but inevitable consequence of a vast array of fundamental shifts in the workplace. Many well-paid, full-time, secure and rewarding jobs, especially in manufacturing, have disappeared. Increased reliance on part-time, temporary workers has undermined family and community stability.

That instability mirrors and weakens already shifting family structures: More families must depend on two earners in order to maintain themselves at even a sustenance level.

At the same time, the demonization of caring government — a phenomenon that has been particularly pronounced in countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States — leads to declining public investment in social housing and in local authorities and non-profit organizations concerned about the issue. This has been accompanied by a parallel demonization of the poor themselves — with women who receive welfare cheques dismissed as 'welfare queens' — which makes it easier for communities to cut funds and programmes designed to assist the most fragile of its members.

### Excluding the poor

Homelessness is the predictable result of private and public-sector policies that exclude the poor from participating in the economic revolution, while safety nets are slashed in the name of 'global competitiveness'. Moreover, the situation is perpetuated by a deep reluctance to tackle the roots of the problem.

Such concepts as the existence of a social contract, of community, of concern for the long-term good or even of public morality are discarded as people ignore the growing, simultaneous presence of high levels of prosperity on the one hand and of homelessness on the other. The principles of economic and social rights — an integral part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 50th anniversary of which is being celebrated with much fanfare — are trampled without regard or regret.

That lack of a collective conscience makes it possible — at a time when the booming economy and deregulation of the private sector have led to soaring rents — for the United Kingdom and other countries to sell off public housing, either to occupants or to private landlords, without regard to the need for substitute measures

for those who remain or are being added to the lists of the homeless.

Despite bureaucratic assurances that there are satisfactory stocks of 'affordable housing', flourishing real estate markets have led to gentrification of entire neighbourhoods that once offered low-cost shelter to poor people. Because the number of workers who are either unemployed, underemployed or low paid has grown, more and more people have to rely on shrinking social welfare payments. In many countries, it is the young who, once more, are specially targeted. For example, since 1988, 16- and 17-year-olds in the United Kingdom have been denied welfare, which is a factor in the rising number of homeless young people in that country.

Mental illness, drugs, and alcohol abuse continue to destroy lives, but fewer resources are being invested in dealing with them. In the United States, institutions for the mentally ill have been closed in favour of more humane community living arrangements, but these are chronically underfunded. Eager to live with others, but often without adequate backup services and support, many such people are left to fend for themselves on the streets.

People in the industrialized world are living with the results of the changes that have occurred and of our responses (or lack of responses) to them. In Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain, the number of households in which people live below the poverty line now far exceeds the number of available social housing units. In Spain, for example, 2 million households that would qualify for social housing are competing for just 200,000 units. In Greece, where members of 650,000 households live in poverty, there is no social housing.

While it is becoming easier to fall from a marginal (and even a managerial) job to the street, it is much harder — virtually

impossible — to make the journey in the other direction. There are daunting obstacles: the lack of a permanent address, a place to keep clean, the carfare required for a job search, a telephone number to leave with prospective employers. Now, the barriers are being raised higher still as governments cut back on assistance, tie it to work (or make-work) projects, insist that women with small children go into the workforce (although safe and adequate day care may not be available) and deny more categories of applicants. This identical pattern may not, of course, be true everywhere — in the Nordic countries, for example — but it is sufficiently repetitive as to seem pervasive.

In their zeal to deny the evidence of economic or social malfunctioning, more and more communities have tended to criminalize homelessness, a move that is, in equal parts, cynical and futile. By the end of 1996, three quarters of the 50 largest cities in the United States had imposed anti-begging laws. In Seattle, officials ordered vigorous enforcement of sidewalk and trespass laws, making it difficult for homeless people even to sit on benches in the downtown area. Like their rights, their existence is denied.

It is easy enough to ascribe 'rights' to people, including the right to housing. Fifty years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed that every person has the right to "... a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing..." Since then, 11 additional human rights instruments have enshrined the right to decent housing.

Actually achieving those rights is, of course, more problematic. Even last-resort housing, emergency shelter, is in short supply. For example, although the number of shelter beds in Los



UNICEF/97-0221/Press U.S.A.

*Homelessness interferes with the fulfilment of rights and with normal family life. This family of five, having reached the maximum stay in a shelter, has been given a one-week voucher for a motel room in Daytona Beach (USA). The children, ages 7 to 13, are not in school.*

Angeles more than tripled, from 3,500 to 10,800, between 1986 and 1996, there are still five to eight homeless people for every available space.

Delegates to the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II, Istanbul, 1996) and those to the World Food Summit (Rome, 1996) laboured long and hard to win grudging endorsements of the rights to housing and to food, respectively. Throughout most of the industrialized world, the right to housing is treated as nothing more than the statement of a worthy, albeit distant, goal. Perhaps the problem is one of perception: that the enshrined right to housing would mean committing to massive home-building programmes and then to the cost of maintaining such housing stocks.

In reality, however, what is needed most is a determination to create *conditions* that promote housing opportunities for all. That means removing obstacles to housing, including the gap between the minimum wage and the cost of decent accommodation, as well as establishing partnerships

with homeless people, service and support groups, communities and local governments. Unfortunately, the private sector, which is so often a source of innovative solutions, has not shown any sustained interest in tackling the problem, which it does not see as part of its responsibility. Now, however, the private sector must somehow become involved in creating affordable housing, acknowledging that a healthy future for children depends on many things, housing among the most important of them.

Failure to take those steps dooms countries to continuing crises of homelessness. Under the McKinney Act, the United States has spent more than \$10 billion on assistance for the homeless. In addition to emergency food, shelter and health care, it has financed help for young runaways, for initiatives designed to aid homeless people in making their way back into the housing market and for placing homeless children in school.

Throughout the years, the Act, which came into force in 1987, has undoubtedly helped hundreds of thousands of Americans move out of the legions of the

homeless. But the tendency to 'put out fires', to respond to symptoms of homelessness rather than treating its roots, means that the numbers continue to rise.

Nonetheless, there are some reasons for cautious optimism. There are a number of industrialized countries, especially in Europe, that are ever more imaginative in seeking solutions. In Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, the right to housing has been incorporated into the national constitutions. While this often amounts only to a statement of intent rather than an entitlement, it is a sign that attitudes to homelessness are slowly becoming more humane and realistic. Other countries need to follow suit by giving a more sustained and practical emphasis to adequate housing as a human right.

A number of cities in Belgium now tax uninhabited houses in order to discourage owners from neglecting property and speculating. In the city of Ghent, that particular initiative led to a 50 per cent decrease in the number of registered uninhabited homes in just five years. France has

announced an ambitious programme of building houses for the extremely disadvantaged and requisitioning vacant houses from institutional owners.

Austria's Special Assistance Bureau for Persons in Danger of Eviction offers a service to help people organize their finances. As a result, 60 per cent of rental arrears are eventually paid by tenants, and evictions, which are costly to taxpayers, are prevented.

Perhaps the most concerted and successful effort to deal with homelessness is in Finland where, after the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless in 1987, the Government devised a multifaceted response to the problem. It includes house-building, social welfare and health care services, and the obligation to provide a home of minimum standards for every homeless person. In just 10 years, the number of homeless in Finland has been cut in half.

As part of its attack on the problem, Finnish authorities recognized that the homeless young, in particular, need more than four walls and a roof. Therefore, they established a programme for housing homeless teenagers near 'support families' who help them keep their lives on track.

Clearly, homelessness is not an unsolvable problem if we have the political will to remove the strangling obstacles and to apply imaginative solutions.

Celebrations of a new millennium will ring hollow, indeed, if we do not put in place new plans, new ideas and a new determination to eliminate the homelessness that has bedevilled human history. Early in this century John Dewey, the great American educator, described what the goal should be. It remains as hopeful, and as distant, as it was then: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his [or her] own child, that must the community want for all its children." ■

# INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES PROGRESS AND DISPARITY

## Child death rates plummet

Death rates of children and youth in industrialized countries are low, and one might think there is little room for improvement. Yet mortality rates among children under 20 in industrialized countries have fallen dramatically in recent decades. Death rates for girls and boys in 1993 are less than half what they were in 1970.

Nonetheless, boys continue to die, on average, at a rate about 50% higher than girls: Boys' rates fell from 184 per 100,000 in 1970 to 84 in 1993, while girls' declined during the same period from 126 per 100,000 to 57. Boys die at higher rates than girls in all industrialized countries.

The disparity in boys' and girls' death rates is highest in Portugal,

where the rate for boys in 1993 was 72% higher than for girls. Israel has the smallest disparity, with the boys' rate 25% greater.

There are significant disparities among countries. Romania has the highest combined mortality rates: 179 deaths per 100,000 population for boys and 127 per 100,000 for girls. Japan has the lowest rates: 54 deaths per 100,000 for boys and 35 for girls.

Most of the decline in death rates among under-20s occurred among children under 5, mainly the result of improved health care. Death rates for ages 15-19 (boys and girls) declined by about half the under-5 rate. Most of the older boys' deaths are caused by accidents, such as car crashes, falls and firearm mishaps.

## Boys' death rates surpassing girls'

	Deaths per 100,000 population age 0-19, 1993		% decline in mortality rate, 1970-93		% by which male rate exceeds female rate 1993
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Israel	80	64	-	-	25
Greece	71	51	69	72	39
Sweden	57	41	52	48	39
Netherlands	66	47	53	50	40
Bulgaria	137	97	45	46	41
Hungary	106	75	61	62	41
Romania	179	127	60	65	41
United Kingdom	68	48	60	60	42
Germany	65	45	-	-	44
Switzerland	69	48	58	56	44
Denmark	71	49	51	47	45
Poland	113	78	52	54	45
Australia	73	49	61	62	49
Canada	73	49	57	57	49
United States	104	69	45	45	51
New Zealand	102	67	45	46	52
Finland	61	40	56	54	53
France	72	47	56	58	53
Japan	54	35	67	68	54
Spain	71	46	-	-	54
Austria	82	53	65	66	55
Norway	70	45	53	51	56
Czech Rep.	90	57	-	-	58
Russian Fed.	181	110	-	-	65
Portugal	115	67	-	-	72

Source: UNICEF, based on data from WHO.

## Getting the lead out

Lead poisoning has serious health consequences, especially for children, and there is no easy cure. The good news is that industrialized countries are succeeding in efforts to reduce lead exposure, resulting in lower levels of lead in the blood of both children and adults.

The United States has the largest reduction in blood lead levels among the 11 countries for which data are available, with an 82% reduction over 15 years. Canada, Italy and Sweden follow. Much of this progress is due to the reduction of lead in gasoline, but removing lead from other sources, especially the solder in food cans, has also helped. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that elimination of leaded gasoline saves the United States more than \$400 million a year in children's health care costs.

Lead can damage a child's brain, kidneys and reproductive system, and at high levels of exposure can cause coma, convulsions and death. Even low levels are associated with reductions in IQ and attention span,

learning disabilities, hyperactivity, behavioural problems, impaired growth and hearing loss.

Major sources of lead include leaded gasoline, paint, water pipes, food-can solder, ceramic glazes, cosmetics, patent medicines and lead-acid batteries, as well as factory emissions.

Over the past years, as evidence has mounted of lead toxicity at even low concentrations in the blood, medical authorities have repeatedly reduced the blood lead level deemed acceptable, and countries have taken steps to reduce exposure. In 1991, the United States set the 'level of concern' for lead in the blood of children at 10 micrograms per decilitre, and other countries have adopted this standard. However, no clearly defined safe threshold has been found.

The success of the industrialized countries in reducing lead exposure points to the need for global action, since children tested in developing countries have been found much more likely to carry high concentrations of lead in their blood.

## Falling lead levels



Sources: Fanelli, James J., *An analysis of worldwide studies detailing the effects of the reduction of gasoline lead on air lead and blood lead*, Center for Energy and Environmental Studies, Princeton University, 1997; and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 'Update: Blood lead levels - United States, 1991-94', *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report*, vol. 46, no. 7, 1997.



UNICEF/96-0274/Toutoumji

*Aid should target people's basic needs, such as water and sanitation. Here, two girls use a handpump in a village near Asyut (Egypt).*

## Targeting poverty

In the battle against poverty, basic social services are fundamental. This means securing people's access to education, health care, adequate nutrition, family planning services, and safe water and sanitation.

UNICEF and other development agencies promote the 20/20 Initiative, which calls on governments of donor and developing countries to allot 20% of their development assistance and national budgets, respectively, to basic services.

Donor countries are becoming more explicit and transparent in reporting on their support for basic services. In the past three years, annual reports on aid by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have included data on bilateral (or country-to-country) aid to basic education

and health. All but 5 of 21 donors provided data on at least one of these categories in the latest report.

Among countries providing data in 1995, the United States gave the highest portion of bilateral aid to

basic health care: 5.3%. Germany provided 4.0% of its bilateral aid for basic education, the highest among countries reporting. These are disappointing figures compared to the target of 20%.

### Aid to the basics

	% of total aid (1995) committed to:		% of total aid (1995) committed to:		
	Basic education	Basic health	Basic education	Basic health	
United States	1.8	5.3	Japan	0.5	0.6
Sweden	3.1	5.0	Switzerland	0.4	0.5
Australia	2.6	3.7	Austria	-	0.4
Belgium	0.3	3.6	Portugal	0.1	0.4
Norway	1.1	3.5	Denmark	-	-
Canada	0.1	3.1	France	-	-
Spain	0.9	3.0	Ireland	-	-
Netherlands	1.2	2.9	Luxembourg	-	-
Germany	4.0	1.4	United Kingdom	-	-
Italy	-	1.4	<b>Total</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1.7</b>
Finland	-	0.9	Source: OECD, <i>Development Co-operation</i> (1997 report), 1998.		
New Zealand	0.1	0.7			

## Is aid heading for extinction?

For the fifth straight year, aid for development provided by industrialized countries has declined, slipping to \$55.5 billion in 1996, a decrease of 4% in real terms from 1995 and down by 16% from the highest aid level, in 1992. In fact, at the present rate of decline, official development assistance (ODA) would cease to exist by 2015.

This trend jeopardizes a commitment by donor countries to close gaps between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' within and between countries. Donor countries pledged to achieve by 2015 a 50% reduction in the number of people, currently 1.3 billion, living in absolute poverty — on a dollar a day or less.

ODA as a proportion of donor countries' GNPs, a measure of their ability to provide aid, fell to an average of 0.25% in 1996, compared to 0.34% in 1990. That is the lowest proportion since 1970, when the aid target of 0.7% of donors'

GNPs was agreed upon.

Only four countries — Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden — consistently allocate more than the target. Denmark topped the list in 1996, allotting 1.05% of its GNP for aid, while the United States ranked lowest, giving 0.12%.

Denmark also led donors on the basis of aid per person, giving \$338 per capita, while Portugal was the lowest per capita donor at \$22. Japan and the United States were the largest donors in total dollar terms, each allocating \$9.4 billion.

If all donors had met the aid target, annual ODA would be \$100 billion above its current level. That amount, over 10 years, would be more than sufficient to ensure that everyone in developing countries had access to basic social services — including basic education, health care, family planning, adequate nutrition and safe water and sanitation.

### Aid: Going, going . . .

	ODA as % of donor nations' GNP		Amounts (in 1996 \$)		
	%1996	%1990	Total aid (\$ billions) 1996	Aid per person (\$) 1996	Change per person (\$) since 1990
Denmark	1.05	1.03	1.8	338	66
Sweden	0.88	0.99	2.0	227	-23
Norway	0.87	1.23	1.3	302	-9
Netherlands	0.80	0.98	3.2	208	1
France	0.49	0.65	7.5	128	-26
Luxembourg	0.44	0.23	0.1	199	106
Belgium	0.34	0.57	0.9	90	-24
Finland	0.34	0.65	0.4	80	-79
Canada	0.32	0.43	1.8	60	-22
Germany	0.32	0.36	7.6	93	-8
Switzerland	0.32	0.34	1.0	142	2
Australia	0.31	0.33	1.1	62	-1
Ireland	0.29	0.17	0.2	50	33
United Kingdom	0.28	0.28	3.2	55	6
Austria	0.24	0.27	0.6	69	3
New Zealand	0.22	0.22	0.1	34	-2
Portugal	0.22	0.31	0.2	22	0
Spain	0.22	0.22	1.3	32	5
Italy	0.21	0.35	2.4	42	-20
Japan	0.18	0.29	9.4	75	-26
United States	0.12	0.21	9.4	35	-17
<b>Average</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.34</b>	<b>Total \$55.5</b>	<b>Avg. \$68</b>	<b>-\$15</b>

Source: OECD, *Development Co-operation* (1997 report), 1998.