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HOMELESS AMERICANS NEED SHELTER FROM VIOLENCE

By Christina Schulthoff
Medill News Service

WASHINGTON - In May 2001, Walter Eakman, a 47-year old homeless man from New York City, was lit on fire and died after the flames had eaten up over 80 percent of his skin. The reason? He had failed to say "excuse me" after bumping into someone. The killers? Three youths, aged 14, 15 and 16.

A few months earlier in Spokane, WA., homeless man Rick Rice was beaten to death with a pole by three young adults. They were celebrating one of the attackers' 26th birthday.

People who are homeless are forced to lead their private lives in public places. Bias and the view of the homeless as second-class citizens can lead to violence.

Last year, 18 homeless people were murdered in cases investigators and prosecutors described as "vicious," "incredibly cruel," and the "redefinition of inhumanity," according to a report by the National Coalition for the Homeless. Surprisingly, the accused in many of the cases are frighteningly young -- out of 58 people arrested, 45 were teenagers and only eight were over the age of 25, according to the report. Violent crimes occurred in 29 cities and the vast majority of the accused as well as the victims were male.

In Baltimore, for example, three teenagers went on a "bum stomping" spree last year. In January they beat George D. Williams, 46, to death with a baseball bat and pushed him from the top of an old warehouse where he slept. Three months later, they killed Gerald H. Holle, 55, with a metal pipe. The third murder, which led to the teenagers' arrest, was the beating death of 47-year old Harry Lawhorn in June.

All three victims had lived in homeless encampments along the south Baltimore railroad tracks. About 65 to 70 men survive there off of fish and odd jobs. One of the attackers, had discovered the so-called "land that time forgot" while taking a shortcut to his aunt's house. In the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) report, Sgt. Ernest Anderson said: "They did it because they really enjoyed it. They did it for the pure sport of it. They did it because they could." The three assailants, aged 16 and 17, were charged as adults for the murders.

Since many homeless live in isolated areas, they are easily attacked and some kids see brutalizing them as fun, says Donald Whitehead, executive director for the NCH. Also, people don't like to see the homeless because they make them feel uncomfortable, according to Pallavi Rai, staff attorney at the

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National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

"Homeless people have been so villainized that people sometimes view them as less than human," explains Whitehead. So they become easy violent crime victims, used by people to take out their frustrations.

The lack of compassion for the homeless is illustrated in a bizarre case that happened in October in Fort Worth, TX. Chante Mallard, a 25-year-old nurse's aide, had been drinking and using ecstasy when she hit a man with her car. The impact catapulted the man headfirst through Mallard's windshield. She panicked and drove on to her home, with Gregory Glenn Biggs, 37, stuck in her windshield. She parked her car in her garage and lowered the door.

After Mallard confessed to police, she told them that she periodically had gone into the garage to check on Biggs and apologize profusely, but she ignored his cries for help. Biggs was trapped in Mallard's windshield for up to 24 hours. After he died a slow death in her garage, Mallard and Clete Jackson, a friend who has been charged with evidence tempering, removed Biggs and drove him to a nearby park where they dumped his body. Mallard was arrested for failure to stop and render aid as well as for murder. She faces no more than five years in prison if she is convicted. Police said there is a good possibility that Biggs would be alive if he had gotten help.

Whitehead says it is alarming how desensitized to the homeless society has become. The youngest victim, who was killed by a firebomb, was 4 months old. He adds that a long-term goal for his group is to have the homeless treated as a protected class in hate crime legislation. The coalition is also proposing that a database tracking these hate crimes should be maintained by the Justice Department.

"If there was enough affordable housing, this wouldn't happen," says Whitehead. He emphasizes that it is essential to get people off the streets. Lack of affordable housing is the number one cause of homelessness.

"For us, housing and affordability is the main issue," agreed Steve Berg, vice president for programs and policy at the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

On average, a single worker earning the minimum wage -- \$5.15 an hour -- would have to work 87 hours each week to pay for a two-bedroom apartment and still keep about 30 percent of his or her income. This is barely sufficient to acquire other necessities like food and clothes, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

As a result, about 700,000 men, women and children were homeless every night in 1999, according to the NCH. This compares with 500,000 to 600,000 in 1988.

According to Philip Mangano, executive director of the Interagency Council on Homelessness, the best policy for the government is to indicate that it will not tolerate homelessness. He said this also would solve many violence problems on the streets. "Rather than figure out how police can protect people on the streets, let's figure out how to get [the homeless] off the streets and into housing, so that they are not subject to discrimination any longer," said Mangano.

According to the Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness, which was released by the National Conference of Mayors last year, requests for emergency shelter have increased by an average of 13 percent in 2001 in the 27 surveyed cities, which included Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles and Seattle. In 52 percent of those cities, shelters may have to turn away homeless families because of lack of resources.

The majority of homeless are single men (40 percent) and families (40 percent), followed by single women (15 percent) and unaccompanied minors (4 percent). About half are black (50 percent), followed by whites (35 percent), Hispanics (12 percent) and Native Americans (2 percent). Experts say the reason more blacks are homeless is that more of them work in low-income jobs. The 2000 median income for whites was \$45,904, compared with only \$30,439 for blacks. Almost eight percent of whites and 22 percent of blacks lived in poverty that year.

Besides a lack of affordable housing, the report lists mental illness, substance abuse, unemployment and low paying jobs as causes for homelessness.

Twenty years ago, people earning the minimum wage were much better off than today. That is because the minimum wage stayed frozen at \$3.35 an hour from 1981 to 1990 while the cost of living rose 48 percent. In 1996, Congress raised the minimum wage to \$5.15 an hour, which made up for slightly more than half of the ground lost to inflation in the 80s. Therefore, the real value of the minimum wage in 1996 was 18 percent less than in 1979, according to the NCH.

Most minimum wage workers - 72 percent - are adults 20 years old or older, not teens looking for part-time jobs.

Because of low wages, 20 percent of homeless people who have jobs can't climb out of homelessness. It is virtually impossible for those without a job.

But trying to find a job is tough for the homeless, according to Berg. "The job hunting process is very difficult when you don't have a place that you can get phone calls," he said.

Phone calls are one problem. Mail service is another. Post offices often deny the homeless post office boxes and even if they do get a box, the postal service may cut off general delivery after 30 days. If a homeless person does manage to overcome both of these problems, they may still get stuck with a post office box across town, far from the shelter where they are staying, which can be a problem when you don't have a means of transportation.

The mail problem angers homeless advocates, especially because in 1998 Postmaster General Marvin Runyon declared that, "all Americans are entitled to a free form of mail service."

Another form of discrimination is the "sit-lie" ordinances that many cities have adopted making it illegal to sit or lie down on a sidewalk. This is a problem for the homeless, who often are forced to sleep on sidewalks or benches. Many homeless rights experts believe that the ordinances are an attempt to hide homelessness, instead of really doing something to fight it. These ordinances are one cause for the increasing trend of violent crimes against the homeless, according to Rai. "The government has to stop singling out the homeless," she says.

Berg adds that it is tough to be dealt with fairly when you are homeless. Employers may be biased toward an applicant because he or she does not have a permanent address.

This brings everything back to the affordable housing issue. If it could be provided to people, they wouldn't have to live on the streets and they wouldn't have to deal with as much discrimination, according to experts.

Berg says affordable government housing should be the number one priority. He adds that getting people off the streets is the final answer. "Solutions aren't beyond our grasp," he said.

Because the government realizes the importance of cheap

housing, its efforts have concentrated on eliminating "chronic homelessness" by providing shelter. Last year, the Bush administration reactivated the Interagency Council on Homelessness. The council is a collaborative effort of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Veterans Affairs. The collaboration between the three agencies would provide \$35 million in permanent housing and critical services to long-term homeless people.

While \$35 million may not seem like much in the face of the large number of homeless, it is a big deal according to Brian Sullivan, HUD press officer. He said the fact that three federal agencies are coming together and are reallocating funds for this effort is extraordinary. Executive Director Mangano added that this effort can be looked at as a demonstration program of what is possible when agencies work together.

"People on the streets are labeled as homeless," said Mangano. "Discrimination follows labeling." Therefore, government efforts must be centered around getting people off the streets and into permanent housing.

Mangano emphasized that helping people not to fall into homelessness in the first place is very important as well. He said the number of homeless young adults, ages 18 to 24, has been on the rise. Most of these young adults are foster children. Foster families don't receive any aid from the state after foster children turn 18, and the kids suddenly find themselves on their own.

Mangano said the young adults oftentimes trade their bodies for a place to live and fall into a culture of homelessness because they don't have the resources to get out of foster care and into the world.

President Bush's budget for 2003 includes \$60 million in transitional resources to prevent young adults from becoming homeless and to help those who already are. "We can't afford to wait for people to become homeless before we give them resources," said Mangano. He said the council has adapted a "policy of prevention."

Mangano added that many homeless are doubly discriminated against because many of them come from vulnerable population groups such as the mentally ill and substance abusers. He said this kind of discrimination is intolerable and needs to be ended.

"Homeless people are simply our poorest neighbors," he said.

