

Bush's 'thousand points of light' snuffed out as homelessness grows

by Marcia Merry

In the midst of one of the harshest winters on record, on Jan. 11 President Bush announced cuts in the federal budget affecting the homeless. His action merely dramatizes the hoax that the unmet needs of millions of Americans would be taken care of by charity, which was a promise made by George Bush in his presidential campaign. At his inauguration, Bush used the expression, a "thousand points of light," to refer to his view that hundreds of local charities and initiatives should spring up to take care of the hungry, the homeless, and the needy. After only one year of the Bush administration—following eight years of Reagan—the lights are going out.

A report issued at year end of 1989 by the United States Conference of Mayors shows the extent of deprivation and want in 27 major cities. Titled "A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 1989," the survey gives the results of an extensive canvas of city offices in charge of providing food and housing for emergency and chronic need.

Out of the official census population of 25,632,000 in the 27 cities surveyed, at least 4,742,000 are officially in the poverty category. In fact, this is an understatement, because this calculation is based on 1988 population estimates, and 1986 poverty rates, and the latter category has worsened since then.

Table 1 shows the 27 cities surveyed, listed by region. Also shown are the percentage rates of increase and decrease in demand by city residents for food or shelter aid over the past year. Overall, requests for emergency food assistance increased by an average of 19% in the cities surveyed from year-end 1988 to 1989. And requests for emergency shelter increased by an average of one-fourth over that time period.

What these rates of increased requests for help show is that neither the general economy, nor "points of light" charity, is able to ameliorate the worsening conditions for people.

The United States Conference of Mayors first brought the problem of the shortage of emergency services (food, shelter, medical care, energy and income assistance) to national attention in 1982, by doing a 55-city survey, in collaboration with the U.S. Conference of City Human Services Officials. That survey showed that the demand for emergency services

was on the increase, and that only 43% of that demand was being met. Since then, the crisis has worsened.

Permanent damage to the workforce

In 1983, the Conference of Mayors appointed 20 mayors to a "Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness," which meets twice a year, and provides information to Congress and to the public. Today, Boston Mayor Raymond L. Flynn heads the task force, now numbering 32 mayors. Flynn will chair a session of the group at the Conference of Mayors mid-winter meeting on Jan. 24 in Washington, D.C.

The material that could be made public at that meeting exposes what a mockery the "thousand points of light" concept was from the start. The underlying problems facing people are not those of temporary, personal dislocations. Millions of Americans are facing the lack of jobs, housing, and the physical means to continue the basic existence of their families.

In addition, because of the underlying decay of the real economy of the nation, city and state budgets, as well as the

FIGURE 1
40% of the homeless are youth and families

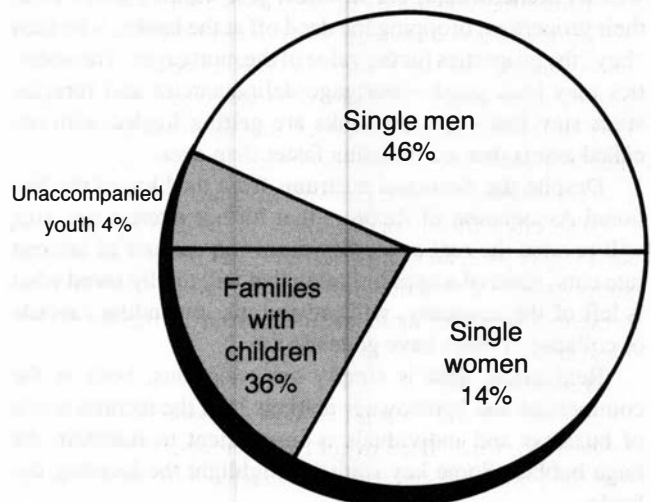
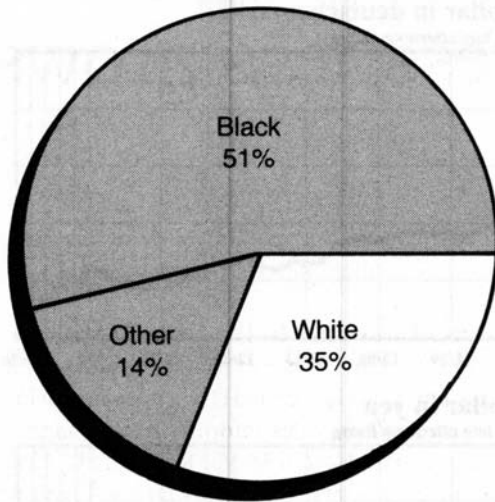


FIGURE 2

65% of the homeless are non-white



Source: U.S. Conference of Mayors annual report, "A Status Report on Hunger and Homeless in America's Cities: 1989," published December 1989.

federal budget, are less able to deal with the growing needs. In the first week in January, for example, New York City officials announced a projected \$150 million in cuts in city services because of the plunge in tax revenues.

States previously haughty about their balanced budgets are now in crisis, too. Virginia officials have announced the need for draconian cuts of \$1 billion this year. At least \$223 million in agency service cuts are being planned.

Figures 1 and 2 show that of the number of homeless in the 27 cities surveyed, 40% are families with children, or are underage minors themselves. About 51% of the homeless are black, 35% are white, and 14% are other groups.

Under the conditions of despair, 44% of the homeless are drug addicts or alcoholics—a miserable situation that is unfortunately not surprising. In connection with this large group, an estimated 25% of the homeless are severely mentally ill. However, what is new, and shocking to realize, is that 26% of the homeless are veterans, and 24% of the homeless are employed, but cannot afford a place to live.

The city officials participating in the survey completed an 11-page statistical questionnaire, and also provided descriptions of the situation in their jurisdictions. The following presents a summary national picture from the reports of these local areas.

Eastern states:

Boston: "Food pantries in Boston report an increase in requests for food. The Project Bread Hunger Hotline reports that the phone calls to their services have increased significantly. . . . The state's fiscal crisis and accompanying budget reductions have directly impacted families with children.

The insufficient level of public assistance payments has not kept pace with the rising cost of living. High housing and fuel costs have also resulted in more families turning to emergency food programs for help."

New York City: "The number of families with children requesting emergency food assistance in New York City has increased 5%, from approximately 1.5 million to more than 1.6 million."

Midwestern states:

Kansas City: "This figure—16% increase for food—is

TABLE 1

Hunger and homelessness in 27 major U.S. cities

City	Persons in poverty category as of 1988 (thousands)	Percent increase in food relief requests 1988-1989	Percent increase in housing relief requests 1988-1989
Eastern states:			
New York City	1,059	5	3
Philadelphia	389	n.a.	0
Washington, D.C.	131	43	44
Boston	133	15	15
Trenton	22	25	70
Providence	37	28	88
Alexandria	11	6	54
Subtotal	1,782	20	39
Midwestern states:			
Chicago	786	0	20
Cleveland	132	n.a.	25
Minneapolis	53	17	22
St. Paul	32	25	0
Kansas City	66	16	15
Louisville	63	15	n.a.
Subtotal	1,132	15	16
Southern states:			
New Orleans	161	22	30
Norfolk	68	27	30
Nashville	69	20	20
Charleston	20	20	4
Charlotte	52	20	20
San Antonio	226	19	24
Subtotal	596	21	21
Western states:			
Los Angeles	634	13	n.a.
San Francisco	116	25	n.a.
Seattle	62	5	n.a.
Denver	78	25	0
Portland	62	17	36
San Diego	152	5	5
Santa Monica	11	36	35
Phoenix	117	33	20
Subtotal	1,232	20	19
Total	4,742	up to 43%	up to 88%

Source: Adapted from the United States Conference of Mayors, *A Status Report on Hunger and the Homelessness in America's Cities: 1989*.



In New York City, where this photo was taken at a homeless shelter, the number of families with children requesting emergency food assistance has increased 5%, from approximately 1.5 million to more than 1.6 million.

based on a comparison of the pounds of food distributed by the Harvester's Food Bank to local emergency assistance agencies and church pantries. The percentage was also substantiated by the Mid-America Assistance Coalition which reported a 16% increase in requests for food."

Louisville: "The community-wide pantry system, which supports 27 distribution centers, has seen an increase of 15%. The system is operated by our local food bank, Dare to Care."

Southern states:

San Antonio: "The percentage of food assistance requests by families continues to increase. The number of two-income households ineligible for food stamps, but in need of assistance, is increasing annually. Families are utilizing a higher percentage of their expendable income for housing."

New Orleans: "Families, even if employed, are unable to meet bare minimum expenses, and if they do, they live on the edge. Expenses incurred for children such as school supplies, have increased. . . . Ozanam Inn reports an increase from the 327,620 meals served in 1988. Travelers' Aid has also seen a 20% increase in clients requesting assistance during the past year."

Western states:

San Francisco: "While there are more services for women and children generally, their need continue to increase. In addition to those who request emergency food assistance, there are many others, especially families, who are unable to turn their immediate need into a vocalized request for food. They simply skip a meal and go hungry because they are unable to reach out at a given time of day, or to leave their neighborhood and home in search of food elsewhere."

Currency Rates

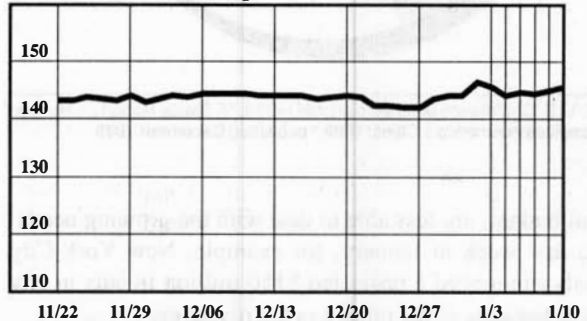
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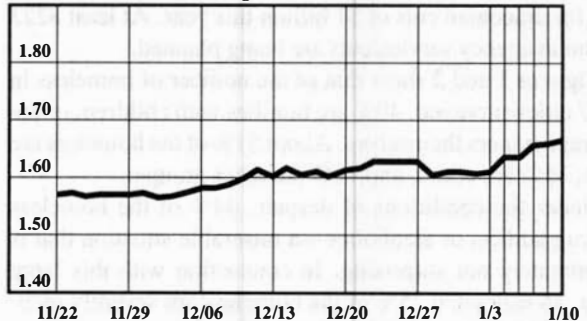
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing

