

## Downturn Brings A New Face to Homelessness

Charities See More Women, Families

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Saturday, August 15, 2009

PONTIAC, Mich. -- The lowest point in Lawanda Madden's life came in February, when she woke up on the floor of her friend's run-down house in this city battered by recession. She was shivering with cold. She remembers turning to her 8-year-old son, Jovon, and thinking: "How did this happen to us? How did we become homeless?"

Only 15 months before, Madden, 39, had a \$35,000-a-year job, a two-bedroom apartment and a car. She was far from rich, but she could treat Jovon to the movies. She occasionally visited her sister in Chicago and bowled in a local league. She dreamed of going to law school. Then she was laid off and lost everything.

"I've had a job since I was 19," she recalled. "I never imagined I would be without a home. You think it's going to get better -- that it's just temporary -- and then six months goes by, and you wonder, 'Wait a minute -- this might be it.' "

With neat hair and clean clothes, a college education and stable job history, Madden represents the new face of American homelessness.

Across the country, community housing networks, charities and emergency shelters are seeing a flood of people like her -- mothers driven out of their homes by the economic collapse. Even as the economy shows signs of improving, the number of homeless families keeps going up. In more and more cases, these people have never been homeless before.

More than half a million family members used an emergency shelter or transitional housing between Oct. 1, 2007, and Oct. 1, 2008, the latest figures available from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The number of homeless families rose 9 percent, and in rural and suburban areas by 56 percent. Women make up 81 percent of adults in homeless families, and tend to be younger than 30 with children younger than 5.

In some areas of the country, family homelessness has almost tripled since 2007, new figures obtained by The Washington Post show. Formerly prosperous areas such as Bergen County, N.J., and Hillsboro, Ore., have been particularly affected, with increases of 161 percent and 194 percent, respectively. Oakland County, where Madden lives, has experienced a 111 percent jump in the number of families seeking shelter or emergency housing since 2007.

"And it's going to get worse," said Marc Craig, president of the Community Housing Network in Oakland County. "Thousands of people here will lose their unemployment benefit in the next few months. Many of them will become homeless."

The Obama administration announced last month a \$1.5 billion package focused on tackling first-time and family homelessness. The funding, which lasts for three years, represents a change from President George W. Bush's approach, which limited most HUD funding to the chronically homeless with substance-abuse or mental-health problems.

"There's been a funding gap for a long time," Craig said. "It's good there's been a change in approach, but the new money is just a Band-Aid. It's got to continue."

The shift is also evidenced in the District, where the number of homeless families is listed as 703, a 20 percent increase over last year. But these figures -- like the HUD statistics -- heavily underestimate the number of homeless families, experts say, as they do not count those who cram themselves and their children into friends' houses, "couch surf," or sleep four to a bed in cheap motel rooms built for single occupancy.

"Families, especially, are likely to explore every option before they stay in a shelter," said Jill Shoemaker, who collects homelessness data for the Community Housing Network in Oakland County. "We just have no way of counting them at the moment."

Madden stays day-to-day at the half-finished home of friend Frankie Johnson in a dilapidated suburb of Pontiac. Layers of drywall are stacked on the floor next to giant bales of insulation. There are holes in the wall, and the one bathroom that works leaks. More pressingly, the three-bedroom house is also occupied by Johnson and seven children.

"It's tight," Madden said stoically, sitting on the bare bed she shares with her son. "But at least it's not winter anymore. When we moved in, in February, we didn't have a bed. For a week, there was no heating. The gas people hadn't turned up. Even with jackets, coats and two pairs of socks on, the cold was indescribable."

In a city with unemployment at almost 20 percent, it is perhaps unsurprising that Madden is still without work, 20 months after being

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laid off from a laboratory testing firm where she worked as a biller. From earning a middle-class wage, she now survives on \$118 a week in child support.

"Whenever I see a job come up I apply, but I don't get replies," she said. "I go to the job center three or four times a week." Madden also enrolled in a No Worker Left Behind program, under which she hopes to complete her bachelor's degree in criminal justice. "But a degree is no good if you can't get a job," she said.

And with no job, "there's no mortgage, no savings -- definitely no house."

In Royal Oak, Mich., Kevin Roach is a front-line witness to this paradigm shift. "We've seen a dramatic increase in women and children seeking help," said Roach, executive director of South Oakland Shelter, which provides 30 beds to homeless people in Oakland County. In October, he turned away 770 people, more than half of them from families. "We turned down 320 children. That's a number that's burned in my head."

Even a year ago, Roach said, he would have described a "prototypical" homeless person as middle-aged, male, with mental-health or drug issues. "But in the last months, we've had a teacher and a banker in our program," he said. "A third of our clients once had a steady income." Two months ago, he added, the number of clients with bachelor's degrees overtook those with mental-health problems.

Roach's clients are sheltered by a rotating list of churches and community groups that take them in for a week each. Last week it was the turn of First Baptist Church of Detroit. Over a plate of lasagna cooked by church volunteers, a mother of two, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told a familiar story. "I moved into my mother's after I was evicted," she said. "But we argued. I think she expected Molly the Maid service. Sometimes you want someone else to load the dishwasher, you know?"

That night, the church's volunteers give the sheltered women makeovers, using make-up scrounged from local stores. "It's amazing how much our guests have changed," said Myrtice Batty, a college professor who has been involved in the church's shelter program for 15 years. "When I first started, there were many more men. Now families are about 50 percent."

The new wave of HUD funding will benefit groups such as South Oakland Shelter, which has just secured a \$300,000 grant to provide rental and utility assistance to struggling families. Roach hopes that a concerted outreach effort will reach women like Veronica, 47, a former Ford worker who lives with her 11-year-old son in a tiny motel room near Royal Oak. She declined to give her full name in an interview.

"I remember in June 2008, Ford called a meeting for me and 20 other employees," she explained. "They got us all up and said, 'This is your last day.' I was like 'Whoa.' I knew straight away I couldn't cover \$650 a month. We left quietly as we didn't want to be evicted -- you're already embarrassed enough."

After moving between friends and family five times in less than a year, and applying unsuccessfully for 65 jobs, Veronica moved into a \$110-a-week motel; her son sleeps on an air mattress at the foot of her bed. "There are so many moments where I don't feel like getting up and putting on clothes, but you do, for him," she said, nodding at John, who wants to be a chemist when he grows up. "And he supports me, too. Sometimes he tells me, 'Don't doubt, believe.' We support each other."

There are thousands of children like John in Oakland County. "This year, the number of students we served was up by a third," said Susan Benson, director of the Oakland Schools Homeless Student Education Program, which advocates for homeless children. Benson estimates the number of homeless students in the county at 4,000 to 10,000. "The average age of a homeless person in Oakland County is just under 9," she said. "Most are doubled up, living with friends, hours away from their schools."

Back on North Johnson Road in Pontiac, Madden finds it difficult to adjust. She used the last of her unemployment benefit to buy a \$2,000 car in January -- allowing her to take Jovon to baseball practice and herself to the job center. The car uses up \$60 a week in gas, but still providing activities for her son is a priority.

"Entertainment doesn't happen too often," she said. "In 2007, I couldn't buy Jovon Christmas presents. Sometimes I take him to his grandma's because I find it hard to feed him. I want to keep him here, but it's more stable there. Sometimes he screams, 'Don't leave!'"

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