

# Why I'm Documenting Family Homelessness in the United States

by Diane Nilan

## *Mile After Mile*

My solo journey to chronicle invisible homelessness among families and youth commenced in November 2005, me behind the unfamiliar wheel of the 27' rig that the bank and I now own. Confident that homeless kids would not be scarce beyond the Chicago metro area and that I'd be able to depict their plight and promise, I aimed this lumbering vehicle—my home since unloading my townhouse for this house-on-wheels—down this nation's backroads, ready to point video and still cameras at people and sights before me.

Before this horrific post-economic-meltdown, things were bad, but the dire sights unfolding before me shocked me. Melding my housing inspector, shelter director, and poverty advocate's mind and eye, I witnessed an obvious erosion of people's quality of life in nonurban areas. Pathetic housing stock, empty storefronts, over-capacity shelters, and shredded safety nets signaled the devastation that this denial-prone nation was ignoring. Stories from kids and parents, east coast to west, confirmed the undocumented depth of homelessness while illuminating courageous resilience.

Nilan gets ready for another leg of her cross-country journey in "Tillie," the road weary motor home in which she has clocked 130,000 miles across 48 states since she began, in 2005.





## Madison, FL.

Mid-December in northern Florida can get cold. But that's too bad for people in homeless situations unless it's really cold, usually below freezing. Only then do sparsely located emergency overnight shelters open. I can't imagine what it's like when it's a degree or two above the opening standard.



## Reno, NV.

Driving down one of the seedier streets of this city, I spotted this motel and kids playing in the parking lot and in the open hallways. Knowing that families often turn to motels as an escape from life on the streets (at the time in 2009, Reno had no family shelter), I pondered life as a child using motel railings as playground equipment.



## Fairmount, GA.

On a dreary day in March 2010, I ventured onto the backroads of northwest Georgia, an area devastated by the housing industry's demise because this is the home of carpet manufacturing. The closed tiny food bank beckoned, causing me to wonder about their food supplies in this time of economic turmoil. The rest of the town looked like it would be in need of a bailout. Probably not going to happen ...



## Phoenix, AZ.

During the process of filming our documentary, *on the edge*, director Laura Vazquez and I visited the Watkins Overflow Shelter in a warehouse provided to United Methodist Outreach Ministries (UMOM) by the City of Phoenix. Because of my background as a former shelter director, this sign spoke to me, and I shuddered at the scope of homelessness among families and women in this city.



Phoenix, AZ.

Watkins Overflow Shelter. I was struck by the industrial nature of efforts to house homeless families. I suppose on one hand, it's better than the lack of alternatives these dozens of families would have had to cope with if Watkins was not an option. That is a sad statement of our nation's disregard for the well-being of families.



Lafayette, LA.

Curiosity got the best of me so I moseyed over and began chatting. Sure enough, this woman and her son were homeless, vulnerably doubled-up with someone who didn't want them staying there. So mom and her seven-year-old visited this park to do laundry, shower, and have a cookout. She lacked the equipment to cook their hot dogs, so I provided tongs, paper plates, and encouragement.



DeKalb, IL.

Hope Haven shelter provides a sanctuary in this college town about 75 miles west of Chicago. This pleasant, affable mother agreed to let me photograph her baby soon to be born, another infant whose life will begin in a shelter.



Disasters aplenty, from the far-reaching destruction wreaked by Katrina to the subtle empty chairs in the local barber shop of a job-challenged community, the web of poverty covers this nation like kudzu, threatening to choke the life out of a once-proud country that took care of its own. Mother Nature, unscrupulous scammers, human nature, and hard times crumpled millions like empty beer cans, discarded along the roadside as trash.

Gallant efforts to repair, rebuild, and restore lives compete with Wall Street robber barons and deficit-distracted legislative priorities. Communities patch together sparse provisions of food and shelter. Schools stretch their purpose to include providing food, clothing and hygiene supports. Parents shrewdly weave resources out of seemingly nothing to keep a roof over their families' heads. Youth scrape together essentials for survival, adapting to deficiency.

All the while, media's stereotypes further confuse elected officials charged with ensuring the well-being of constituents. Congressional reports all but ignore the burgeoning numbers of homeless families and youth, concentrating on the adults

accused of sullyng the imagined pristine streets of has-been cities and towns. HUD's war of words excludes the bulk of this nation's un-housed population.

Compassion competes against cold-hearted budget cuts. The pattern of ignoring human infrastructure rises to new heights, taking down the most vulnerable into a vortex of desperation. Yet, like the pocked roadways connecting one small town with another, the thread of kindness connects human-to-human, sharing vital essentials of food, shelter and hope. I step out into a new place, filled with wonder at the stories of fortitude and goodwill. ■

**Hingham, MA.** Wompatuck State Park. I noticed the composition of the clothes hanging on the line didn't fit the typical array. It looked more like someone washed out items in a five-gallon bucket. Speaking with the mother verified my guess: She, her husband and their 18-month-old baby were having, as she put it, "hard times." They also didn't have money for propane to heat their little rig. The temperature got down to the 30s at night. I heard them arguing—the well-worn script of the desperate income-challenged (albeit mobile) households—so I shared an "extra" electric heater with her.



FEATURES

Grass Roots

New York City Coalition Against Hunger; [www.nyccah.org](http://www.nyccah.org), New York, NY ■ Feeding America; [www.feedingamerica.org](http://www.feedingamerica.org), Chicago, IL ■ U.S. Department of Agriculture; [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov), Washington, DC ■ CentroNia; [www.centronia.org](http://www.centronia.org), Washington, DC ■ City Blossoms; [www.cityblossoms.org](http://www.cityblossoms.org), Washington, DC ■ Let's Move Campaign; [www.letsmove.gov](http://www.letsmove.gov), Washington, DC ■ City Growers; [www.citygrowers.org](http://www.citygrowers.org), Long Island City, NY ■ Nourishing NYC; [www.nourishingnyc.org](http://www.nourishingnyc.org), New York, NY ■ Just Food; [www.justfood.org](http://www.justfood.org), New York, NY ■ Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Homeless Health Initiative; [www.chop.edu/about/chop-in-the-community/homeless-health-initiative/home.html](http://www.chop.edu/about/chop-in-the-community/homeless-health-initiative/home.html), Philadelphia, PA ■ Garden on the Go; [www.iuhealth.org/garden-on-the-go](http://www.iuhealth.org/garden-on-the-go), Indianapolis, IN ■ Sesame Street, Growing Hope Against Hunger; [www.sesamestreet.org/food](http://www.sesamestreet.org/food), New York, NY

Critical Stats Linking Nutrition and Obesity in Children and Adults

National Center on Family Homelessness; [www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org), Needham, MA ■ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), Atlanta, GA ■ Children's Health Fund; [www.childrenshealthfund.org](http://www.childrenshealthfund.org), New York, NY

Homeless and Foster Youth Find Their Voices

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth; [www.naehcy.org](http://www.naehcy.org), Washington, DC ■ California Youth Connection; [www.calyouthconn.org](http://www.calyouthconn.org), San Francisco, CA ■ Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio; [www.cohhio.org](http://www.cohhio.org), Columbus, OH ■ National Foster Youth Action Network; [www.fosteryouthaction.org](http://www.fosteryouthaction.org), San Francisco, CA ■ The Mockingbird Society; [www.mockingbirdsociety.org](http://www.mockingbirdsociety.org), Seattle, WA

Financing the Future

Credit Advocates Counseling Corp.; [www.creditadvocates.org](http://www.creditadvocates.org), New York, NY ■ Association of Independent Consumer Credit Counseling Agencies; [www.aiccca.org](http://www.aiccca.org), Fairfax, VA ■ New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, Office of Financial Empowerment; [www.nyc.gov/ofe](http://www.nyc.gov/ofe), New York, NY ■ Center for Financial Security; [www.cfs.wisc.edu](http://www.cfs.wisc.edu), Madison, WI ■ The Homelessness Prevention Initiative; [www.homelessness-prevention.net](http://www.homelessness-prevention.net), Fort Collins, CO ■ American Financial Solutions; [www.myfinancialgoals.org](http://www.myfinancialgoals.org), Bremerton, WA ■ Jump\$tart Coalition; [www.jumpstart.org](http://www.jumpstart.org), Washington, DC

ON THE HOMEFRONT

Starting the Conversation: 2012 ICPH Conference a Success

HEAR US, Inc.; [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us), Naperville, IL ■ Children's Museum of Manhattan; [www.cmom.org](http://www.cmom.org), New York, NY ■ Homes for the Homeless; [www.hfhny.org](http://www.hfhny.org), New York, NY ■ Horizons for Homeless Children; [www.horizonsforhomeless-children.org](http://www.horizonsforhomeless-children.org), Roxbury, MA ■ Project HOPE – Virginia, Education for Homeless Children and Youth; [www.wm.edu/hope](http://www.wm.edu/hope), Williamsburg, VA ■ First Step Staffing; [www.firststepstaffing.com](http://www.firststepstaffing.com), Atlanta, GA ■ Ruth Fernandez Family Residence, Bronx, NY ■ Safe Haven Family Shelter; [www.safehaven.org](http://www.safehaven.org), Nashville, TN ■ The Family Place; [www.famplace.org](http://www.famplace.org), Saint Paul, MN ■ Camelot Counseling Services; [www.camelotcounseling.com](http://www.camelotcounseling.com), Staten Island, NY ■ New York City Department of Homeless Services; [www.nyc.gov/dhs](http://www.nyc.gov/dhs), New York, NY ■ The Creative Arts Team at The City University of New York; [www.creativeartsteam.org](http://www.creativeartsteam.org), New York, NY

on the Record

Trauma-informed Care: Services That Heal

Compass Family Services; [www.compass-sf.org](http://www.compass-sf.org), San Francisco, CA ■ Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc.; [www.mhanys.org](http://www.mhanys.org), Albany, NY ■ Building Connections: The Sexual Assault and Mental Health Project; [www.mhanys.org/programs/bc/index.php](http://www.mhanys.org/programs/bc/index.php), Albany, NY ■ New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault; [www.nyscasa.org](http://www.nyscasa.org), Albany, NY

The National Perspective

Intergenerational Disparities Experienced by Homeless Black Families

U.S. Census Bureau; [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov), Washington, DC ■ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov), Washington, DC ■ Shinn, M. 2011. International homelessness: Policy, socio-cultural, and individual perspectives. *Journal of Social Sciences* 13:33–70. ■ Johnson, R.A., 2010. African Americans and homelessness: Moving through history. *Journal of Black Studies* 40:583–605. ■ Rosenheck, R. et al. 1999. Special populations of homeless Americans. In *Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homeless Research*, eds. L. Foshburg and D. Dennis, 46–71. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. ■ Hopper, K., and Milburn, N. Homelessness among African Americans. In *Homelessness in America*, ed. J. Baumohl, 123–31. Westport, CT: The Oryx Press. ■

Wilderman, C. 2011. Parental incarceration, child homelessness, and the invisible consequences of mass imprisonment. *Fragile Families Working Papers* 1281. Princeton: Princeton University, Center for Research on Child Wellbeing. ■ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov), Washington, DC. ■ Princeton University. 2008. Parental incarceration and child wellbeing in fragile families. *Fragile Families Research Brief* 42. ■ Scholtz, J. K., and Levine, K. 2004. U.S. Black-white wealth inequality. In *Social Inequality*, ed. K. Neckerman. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. ■ *Note*: Data sets analyzed in this report use slightly different definitions for “white.” U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development data sets define “white” as “non-Hispanic white,” while U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data also include white persons identifying as “Hispanic.” “Wealth” is defined as the sum of assets (homes, savings, retirement accounts, stocks, etc.) minus the sum of debts (mortgages, credit card debt, car loans, etc.); Taylor, P., Kochhar, R., Fry, R., Velasco, G., and Motel, S. July 2011. *Wealth gaps rise to record high for whites, blacks, and Hispanics*. New York City: Pew Research Center.

## EDITORIALS AND COLUMNS

### *The Historical Perspective*

#### Exhibiting Poverty

DeForest, R. and Veiller, L. 1900. *The Tenement House Problem: Including the Report of the New York State Tenement House Commission of 1900*. New York: Macmillan Company. ■ Lubove, R. 1962. *The Progressive and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890–1917*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. ■ Jackson, A. 1976. *A Place Called Home: A History of Low-Cost Housing in Manhattan*. Cambridge: MIT Press. ■ Jackson and Dunbar. 2002. *Empire City: New York through the Centuries*. New York: Columbia University Press.

### *Guest Voices*

#### Why I’m Documenting Family Homelessness in the United States Mile after Mile

HEAR US, Inc.; [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us), Naperville, IL

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