

# Metro's 'new poor' grope for solutions: hostels, food banks struggle to keep up

In our last issue, Excalibur's Paul Armstrong investigated the housing crisis in Metro Toronto. This month's feature focuses on unemployment and new social services offered to alleviate the impoverishment many in Metro face.

## Unemployment

There are over 100,000 unemployed individuals in Toronto, according to the Housing and Hostels Coalition. And while the unemployment rate in Toronto is the lowest of all major Canadian cities, the sheer numbers of the unemployed here represent a serious problem. Although the national unemployment rate has dropped just below 10 percent for the first time in four years, the kinds of jobs that are being created perpetuate many of the economic problems faced by the working poor.

A recent article in *Maclean's* magazine states that between 1981 and 1985, 291,000 jobs in the manufacturing and resources industries have been lost, mainly through automation. However, while there have been many new jobs created at the same

time the bulk of these have been in the low-paid service industry where many positions start at the minimum wage. The result of this trend, says *Maclean's*, is a shrinking middle class and a burgeoning "underclass" of young, uneducated, unskilled workers who lack the money and the opportunity to train for better-paying positions and the professions. And with a federal government dedicated to erasing a burdensome deficit, the outlook is not good for those unskilled and unemployed workers seeking a role in the Canadian economy.

The Brian Mulroney Government's recent toughening of the rules governing the unemployment insurance scheme has contributed to this worsening situation. Under new guidelines introduced this year, pension income along with vacation and severance pay are now considered employment earnings. This means that these sources of income must be exhausted by a claimant before any unemployment insurance payments are made. The Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC) which administers unemployment insurance payments, has also recently become more vigilant in its tactics to catch so-called "cheaters"; people who are deemed not to be entitled to UI benefits.

These latest developments at the CEIC, together with high unemployment rates, have resulted in a belt-tightening for many Canadians who are either unemployed or working at low-paying jobs. This, say the administrators of the food banks, is one of the primary causes of home-



Photos by  
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lessness and hunger. More and more of the homeless are unemployed and have been pushed out onto the streets by the lack of affordable housing. With 85 percent of all vacant units in Metro renting at or above average levels, it is clear, says Margaret Moores, spokesperson for the Housing Not Hostels Coalition, "there aren't a lot of choices for the homeless."

So, in 1986 a problem which three years ago was called a "permanent emergency" by the Social Planning Council has, by all reports, worsened. It is a crisis which, only a short time ago, was thought to be self-inflicted by the indolent and the alcohol abuser.

Today that perception is changing. The 1983 report by the Council concludes that there has been "a shift in the population of hostel users (increased use by young people under 25, employable men, families, single elderly women, women with children and ex-psychiatric patients)." The 1985 report reiterates that claim and adds that the numbers have swelled in the interim.

And as the statistics show, there is no housing problem for those who can afford rents at or above the market rate. The private home and condominium builders are presently experiencing a boom. Yet for those unable to afford a home or pay market rents, the situation is very different.

tively invisible in middle class Canada. They are, says Hilbourn, the "working poor, people who up until a year or two ago could drive a car." They are, in Hilbourn's words, "expendable people, driven out by automation, unemployment." Many time they are single parents, under 25 with one to four children. And the numbers are increasing.

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Many social service agencies echo these comments and paint a picture of despair that begins with poverty, lack of skills, and opportunities, leading to unemployment, family violence, homelessness and hunger. But once again the actual numbers elude the social service agencies. Getting statistics is difficult because many people waiting in food lines are either too proud or too humiliated to fill out the questionnaires asking about their source of income, social assistance an education level.

But regardless of precise statistics, the harsh reality of hunger and homelessness remains a growing concern. "People ask, are there really people who are starving?" Marian Smith of Foodshare said. "Yes, there are people hungry." Indeed, Smith has received reports of mothers fainting in food lines because they give the only food they have left to their children. She has been told of children ripping open and eating packages of spaghetti as they wait in the lines, and of babies being fed only sugar water for a whole week before a welfare cheque arrives. In 1976 the problem of hunger in Metro was not an issue. In 1986 Smith says the need is "chronic."

According to Smith, this new class of poor and working poor are experiencing real hunger because of the lack of housing. Approximately 84 percent of welfare recipients and the working poor in Ontario are paying market rents. This new class of unemployed youth, single parents, welfare recipients and minimum wage earners bears the brunt of Metro's housing crisis. The old stereotypes of users of hostels and "soup kitchens" as alcoholics and derelicts is simply no longer true. This is the most difficult pill for our society to swallow, according to those agencies who are trying to meet the basic requirements of life for the needy.



## The New Poor

Stop 103 on Bloor Street West is a food bank that also offers counseling on employment and housing. In February 1985, 800 people were serviced while in February 1986 the number grew to 2,230 people. The Woodgreen Red Door on Queen Street East is a family hostel offering food, clothing, and shelter for families. Rather than directly providing meals or groceries, vouchers of \$15 to \$35 are given out to needy families for emergencies. The hostel is now receiving 30 to 45 requests a day but is only about to honour up to 24. Because of this, needy single people must be turned away.

According to John Hilbourn of the Woodgreen Red Door, these families represent a new class, a "new poor," which remains rela-

