



The "homeless" are the begrimed, tattered men and women staggering about America's skid rows and boulevards. Often filthy and in rags, some are hungry, others diseased or in pain. Some are seen carrying a bottle in a paper bag, pushing a cart full of odd belong-

ings, rummaging through skips, begging on sidewalks, or scavenging in rubbish heaps and vacant lots. Many reek of cheap liquor, some talk to themselves or to the voices they hear, some of the women carry little babies in bundles made of rags. They constitute America's underclass, 500 000 people perhaps, depending on definition, for nobody quite knows the exact number. They concentrate in the big cities, some 80 000 in New York, 50 000 in Los Angeles, perhaps 30 000 in Chicago. They also spill over into the countryside to

small towns, where some live in caves under bridges or in junk cars, hoping to escape the violence and hopelessness of the metropolis, but increasingly likely to find a hostile reception because there are so many of them.

Some 60-70% are single men, 30-40% are mentally ill, 50% misuse alcohol, perhaps 7% misuse other drugs. Their numbers have swelled because of the recession, the cutbacks in social services, and the closing of mental hospitals. Aggravating factors are misguided social policies that encourage people to become legally homeless to qualify for benefits denied to the non-homeless poor. Furthermore, a million flophouses and other "sub-standard" buildings were torn down in past decades but not adequately replaced.

In a small measure the medical profession has helped by giving some free care or by jolting the nation's conscience about these people's plight, their loneliness and helplessness, their medical problems. Foot problems abound in this group, also frostbite, chronic infections and ulcers, drug abuse, and psychoses. They are also often victims of rape and violence. Imagine what it is like, asked one of them, to recover from an amputation,

or manage your diabetes, or even to suffer from simple diarrhoea when you have to spend all day walking the streets. But solutions are not easily forthcoming, and the state agencies have no money. There are also fewer funds earmarked for cheap public housing, shelters, halfway houses, community care, and outpatient mental treatment.

Moreover many people see homelessness as part of a larger problem of unemployment, decay of traditional family ties, violence, drugs, and misguided social policies. Increasingly the public is becoming impatient, less willing to help, hardened by the daily encounter with so many of these people, suffering from "encounter fatigue," and wondering if giving money to a beggar does not merely help perpetuate the problem. Many municipalities have enacted ordinances against begging and loitering or sleeping on sidewalks and benches. Most people would agree that somehow society needs to act to eradicate such unacceptable degradation and help its most vulnerable members. But the problem admits of no simple solutions, and nobody quite knows what to do.—*GEORGE DUNFA*, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago.