

living without a home



*The homeless
assemble
their shelters*

As the international year of shelter for the homeless draws to a close, Josie Adler, Merle Beetge and Glenda Glover focus on the dimensions of the problem in South Africa.

The issue of homelessness in South Africa requires some understanding of the interaction between political ideology and economic forces. Until the late 1970s, political ideologists believed that the apartheid policy would remove all 'permanent blacks' from 'white' South Africa. Consequently only accommodation for labourers (who were intended to be 'temporary sojourners') was provided in the form of hostels. All blacks were supposed to find permanent homes in the 13 percent of the land allocated to the 'homelands' in terms of the Land Acts. Despite the fact that the policy was steadily failing, the freeze on black housing in 'white' South Africa was maintained. Chris Heunis, Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning, recently reported to parliament that a backlog of approximately 342 000 units, outside of the homelands, would not be eradicated within less than 20 years. The South African Institute of Race Relations talks of a shortage in excess of 574 000 units. A great proportion of these people are homeless — and most are *not* recent arrivals in the urban areas.

However, the problem of homelessness has also been accentuated by the demise of the pass laws, as rural people, taking advantage of their regained freedom of movement, begin to move to urban areas. There they find themselves in the same position as hundreds of thousands of others, without the right to occupy land or erect a dwelling close to potential sources of employment. The Land Acts, the Group Areas Act and trespass laws prohibit them from occupying most land in and around urban areas. If they manage to find an unoccupied corner on which to erect a shack in an overcrowded urban township, they can be evicted under a host of other laws and regulations designed to combat overcrowding, health hazards and other 'undesirable' conditions.

Homeless people are often termed 'squatters'. Many live 'illegally'. They may be Africans living in backyards of properties in white, Indian and 'coloured' residential areas; in shacks in black urban areas; on public land; in rented properties in 'grey' areas such as Hillbrow, Yeoville and Mayfair; on church and mine properties; on agricultural land; on small holdings on the peripheries of the urban areas; and on undeveloped land designated for residential occupation by 'other

groups'.

Many people become squatters on the fringe of the city to retain their city jobs and live with their families in their own homes. Authorities can and do demolish these homes and arrest the occupants for squatting. There is nothing in the law to compel the authorities to provide homeless people with an alternative site or dwelling before demolishing their shacks.

This article focuses mainly on the homeless living in the Witwatersrand area, where until the mid-1970s there were many white-owned farms and smallholdings. The labourers living on these farms bore children and earned residence rights to remain there. Today, there are squatter families who claim to have been there for three generations.

Farming ceased on this land when large sections of it were expropriated for 'coloured' and Indian group areas and the suburban expansion of Johannesburg.

Many ex-farm families who remained on the land, or were pushed out to neighbouring farms by encroaching suburban development, formed the basis of developing squatter settlements. Their numbers grew as they were joined by people leaving established townships, such as Soweto, because of the chronic housing shortage, in search of places to erect their homes. We found a man in one of these settlements who had been on the waiting list for a township house for 22 years. This situation is exacerbated by official building regulations which promote unrealistically high standards at prohibitive cost.

The homeless on the Witwatersrand (and elsewhere in the country) also include pensioners, either men who are too old to be of use to a farmer, or widows of farm labourers, or retired urban workers squeezed out of the growing city, lacking traditional family care or adequate institutional support. There are also the 'migrant widows' who have been deserted by their menfolk, and have come to look for their men or earn money.

Recently a survey was conducted amongst breadwinners and household heads at a 'squatter' settlement known as Weilers Farm, consisting of 6 000 - 8 000 people living on white agricultural land south of Johannesburg. The farm was recently expropriated in response to pressures to remove the homeless from the area.

Two-thirds of those interviewed were men.

The research made it possible to construct a portrait of the average homeless family in the area.

Over 90 percent were not new arrivals on the Witwatersrand, having lived elsewhere in the PWV (Pretoria/Witwatersrand/Vereeniging) area before moving to Weilers Farm. Three-quarters reported residence in the PWV area for 15 or more years, during which they worked and, usually, had their families with them. The greatest proportion of households had an income of between R101 and R300 per month, 10 percent had no income and 20 percent had less than R100 per month. At the other end of the spectrum more than 25 percent had an income of R300 per month and more. Half of the household heads worked in what they classified as formal employment. A further 7 percent said they did informal work and 6 percent found piece jobs. The unemployed accounted for 17 percent and 1 percent were looking for work. A further 20 percent were pensioners.

Their overriding problem is the need to obtain legal accommodation. The illegality of their residence means that they do not exist as far as social planners and services are concerned. Other problems flow from this:

Access and availability of water: Sites where squatters are located seldom have a water supply, so water has to be stolen or bought and occasionally water is collected from streams. All these sources — which are unreliable and sometimes contaminated — involve carrying water some distance.

Education: Entry into schools poses difficulties. Where children are accepted there are often long distances involved and no formal transport facilities.

Health care: Some state services are available and homeless people do have access to them. The visits of health officials to squatter sites have not resulted in water provision or other services.

Welfare agencies and other organisations: These bodies may have bona fide motives for their intervention and may provide much needed resources and services. The consequences, however, can be dependency and even conflict over scarce resources.

Emergency services: Obtaining police, ambulance and fire brigade assistance creates difficulties as these services are strictly not available to communities living illegally. Asking for police assistance in combating crime draws attention to their illegal situation.

Higher costs: Cost of transport to work and to find work are high. For example: a woman who earns R30 a week as a machinist in town, pays R11.20 for her weekly bus ticket. The overall cost of their requirements, food, clothing, fuel are all higher because of their distance from major shopping centres

where commodities are cheaper. Water costs between 50c and R1 for 20 or 25 litres.

Licensing regulations: These make it impossible for people to get the necessary permits to earn a living by starting an informal business in their homes. People who set up shops in their houses, and thereby not only earn income for themselves but provide supply-points in the community, are harassed, sometimes charged, and their stock is confiscated.

For the most part, homeless people are seen by the authorities as a problem to be disposed of. So the police and sometimes the army are deployed to demolish shacks and arrest the occupants, who are often prosecuted under tightened legislation to control squatting and trespass. If they are not legally represented, which applies in virtually all instances, they are processed through the legal system and convicted. They cannot avoid being on the wrong side of the law, because whenever they are in their homes, they are existing illegally.

The controls on the settlement of homeless people are being applied in various forms. *Action is taken against landowners, their tenants or both.* Sometimes the owners are put under pressure to act against squatters. Sometimes they act voluntarily. When homeless people settle on public land, the authorities take direct action.

One way or another, the consequences for the homeless are much the same: they either hang in where they are and re-erect their homes, or find a similar place where they feel they may survive for a while.

Most squatter settlements are merely dispersed. One of the exceptions is Weilers Farm, partially because of the attention this settlement has aroused. The people are now scheduled for removal (as opposed to dispersal) to the Sebokeng/Evaton area. This is the only additional land in that area that is being released for black occupation.

But this will not be the end of their problems. It is questionable whether the sites will be affordable to people with an average income of between R101 and R300 per month for a household of six. Will pensioners be offered sites at prices they can afford? Will those who are either self-employed or working in the formal sector be able to continue their work?

The homeless may have freedom to move. What they require is the freedom to stop moving and settle down. The new 'orderly urbanisation' process is failing dramatically in providing this right. The continued existence of the Land Acts, the Group Areas Act, and the countless other laws and regulations that prevent people from erecting affordable dwellings in areas where they can earn a living will achieve only an acute exacerbation of the existing problem. □