

Another face of US recession: homeless children

REUTERS, Miami

As her mother sat in a homeless shelter in downtown Miami, talking about her economic struggles and loss of faith in the U.S. political system, 3-year-old Aisha Touray blurted out what sounded like a new slogan for the Occupy Wall Street protest movement.

"How dare you!" the girl said abruptly as she nudged a toy car across a conference room table at the Chapman Partnership shelter in Miami's tough and predominantly black Overtown neighborhood.

There was no telling what Aisha was thinking as her 32-year-old mother, Nairkahe Touray, spoke of how she burned through her savings and wound up living in a car with five of her eight children earlier this year.

But how dare you indeed? How does anyone explain to kids like Aisha and countless others how they wound up homeless in the world's richest nation?

In a report issued earlier this month, the National Centre on Family Homelessness, based in Needham, Massachusetts, said 1.6 million children were living on the streets of the United States last year or in shelters, motels and doubled-up with other families.

That marked a 38 percent jump in child homelessness since 2007 and Ellen Bassuk, the centre's president, attributes the increase to fallout from the US recession and a surge in the number of extremely poor households headed by women.

Recent data from the US Census Bureau provided a sobering



REUTERS

Laura Rios, 45, (C) walks with her children Ronaldo (R), Sebastian (2nd L), and Jordey (L) to go to a homeless shelter in New York on December 22.

backdrop. Based on new or experimental methodology aimed at providing a fuller picture of poverty, the data showed that about 48 percent of Americans are living in poverty or on low incomes.

Under the bureau's so-called Supplemental Poverty Measure for 2010, issued last month, the poverty level for a family of four was set at income anywhere below \$24,343 per year.

"I see it every day," said Alfredo Brown, 73, a retired army officer and deputy director of the non-profit Chapman Partnership, when asked about child homelessness.

The organization, funded largely by a 1 percent food and

beverage tax on larger restaurants to bankroll homeless programs, operates two sprawling homeless shelters in Miami-Dade County.

"I see so many children and mothers that are homeless and sleeping in their car or an abandoned building, an old bus. It's a sad situation that we live in a country that has so much and many people have so little," Brown said.

Child homelessness is a relatively new social problem in the United States, where being on the street and the stigma attached to it has long been associated with adults with alcohol or drug dependency issues.

Families accounted for less

than 1 percent of the US homeless population in the mid-1980s, according to Bassuk, but they now comprise about a third of the homeless population. A lot of children are dependent on poverty-stricken single moms.

"There's sort of a Third World emerging right in our backyard. You know, we talk about developing countries but look at what's going on here," Bassuk said.

To put a face to the breadth and depth of the homeless problem, a team of Reuters journalists fanned out across the country in the past week, for interviews with parents and children who are down on their luck.

From Skid Row in Los Angeles to the South Bronx in New York, a

common thread of economic devastation from the recession ran throughout many of the stories these people told.

But there also was a common thread of hope running through their compressed life stories.

Little Aisha in Miami got visibly upset as her mother spoke tearfully about the wear and tear on her children amid her struggles with a bad economy, severe depression, diabetes and chronic foot problems stemming from torn ligaments.

Touray sounded like an Occupy Wall Street protester herself, as she complained about bailout money for banks but not people. "You get treated like an animal because you're homeless," said Touray, who said she lives on just \$583 a month in child support after going through a divorce last year. Her parents, who live separately in Atlanta and Chicago, are also homeless.

"Just because I'm homeless it doesn't mean that I was like nothing yesterday," said Touray, who said four small businesses she owned in Atlanta only went bust due to the recession.

She also complained about the tone-deafness of many politicians, saying they were doing nothing to ease the unemployment and inequality that have come to dominate the national conversation.

"I'm living the real deal," Touray said. "I don't need for somebody to come up here and tell me what the economy's doing. They (the politicians) need to get out here and see these children, see these parents."

To stay or to go? Britons mull future outside EU

REUTERS, London

Long dismissed as "Little Englanders" living on the fringe of politics, Britain's vocal band of EU-haters sense that their moment may have come.

Prime Minister David Cameron's decision to veto a new European Union treaty during a Dec. 8-9 summit has emboldened Britain's so-called eurosceptics, who are now pressing him to loosen ties with the bloc or even leave.

Cameron insists that Britain must remain part of the 27-nation Union, with which the island nation does around half of its trade and which supports an estimated 3.5 million jobs.

"Our membership of the EU is vital to our national interest," Cameron told parliament last week. "We are a trading nation and we need the single market for trade, investment and jobs."

Many legislators from Cameron's Conservative Party, his Liberal Democrat coalition partners, and the opposition Labour Party, share the government line, which reflects a British establishment view formed over nearly four decades of EU membership.

However, an influential and vocal section of Cameron's party dreams of Britain having a similar relationship with the EU to that of Switzerland or Norway -- a free trade agreement which gives access to the EU's huge single market without signing up to what they see as a costly and burdensome bureaucracy.

Public opinion is starting to move in that direction too.

An Ipsos MORI poll in October found 49 percent of British voters would choose to leave the EU in a referendum, compared with 41 percent who would vote to stay in. A similar poll in 2007 found 51 percent of voters would choose to stay in.

EU sources said Cameron, a relative novice to the delicate art of Brussels summitry, had not intended to cast a veto, intending only to use the threat of a "no" as a negotiating tactic to secure concessions for London's financial district.

Scent makers sweeten the smell of commerce

REUTERS, Miami

The aroma of baking bread wafts through the supermarket, even when the ovens are empty. The breezy scent of coconut oil floats through the bathing suit aisle of the department store when summer is months away.

Welcome to the world of scent marketing. Retailers are increasingly using ambient scents to induce shoppers to stay longer, spend more and maybe even behave a little more kindly toward fellow shoppers.

Beyond just creating a pleasant environment, the nascent scent marketing industry uses fragrance to tap into memory and emotion to strengthen brand identity.

Retailers are wary of discussing it lest they be accused of manipulation. But the fragrance makers, researchers and advertising agents gathered in Miami Beach for the ScentWorld conference in December were happy to explain their art.

"Control is one of the most important parts," said Scentevents founder Neal Harris. "Too much could be way too much."

His Los Angeles company provided the cotton candy aroma that sweetened arenas around the world during pop singer Katy Perry's recent candy-themed "California Dreams" tour. At a Hollywood Halloween party, he did what theme parks are rumored to do by releasing a popcorn aroma to put guests in a snacking mood.

"When you smell popcorn you want to eat it. But they're not popping the popcorn there," Harris said.

His company uses fragrance-infused ceramic beads and diffusers to fan the scent through a room. For larger spaces, the scent goes into the air conditioner or ventilating system. It's a dry system so it doesn't linger too long.

"You probably don't want to smell coffee at midnight," Harris said.

Scent marketing is expanding because the technology has become more sophisticated and more affordable, enabling a small retailer to scent the environment for less than \$100 a month, said Jennifer Dublino,



REUTERS

Audience members listen and smell "Green Aria", described by its writer and director Stewart Matthew as a "scent opera" during a preview of the European premier at the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao on Oct 2, 2009.

chief operating officer for the 5-year-old ScentMarketingInstitute.

"Years ago when this first came out it was kind of clunky," she said.

Companies in the industry are privately held and do not report earnings but Dublino estimates their revenues at \$80 million to \$100 million annually worldwide.

That includes ambient scenting and the use of scents in ink, plastics, rubber and textiles but not traditional uses of scent such as consumer packaged goods, food, cosmetics and personal fragrances.

Simon Faure-Field, chief executive of the Equal Strategy consulting firm, has been nicknamed "the smell guy" for his efforts to incorporate scent to build brands.

For a New Balance shoe store in Beijing, he introduced Chinese shoppers to the 105-year-old US brand by creating "a total sensory experience" designed to convey heritage and craftsmanship. He used a nostalgic wood and leather scent, decorated the wooden-floored store with vintage ads and compiled a soundtrack of 1950s bebop music.

Shoppers spent twice as much money as in similarly sized stores elsewhere, partly because the atmosphere induced them to linger, he said. "The longer a customer stays in a store, the more

(they) spend," Faure-Field said.

Success stories from other companies have inspired others to jump on the bandwagon, Dublino said.

Casinos were early adapters, experimenting with scent as they fought to neutralise cigarette and cigar smoke that chased gamers away. Theme parks use artificial scents to help create the illusion that guests are in ancient castles or primeval forests. Upscale stores scent their baby goods department with the soothing smell of baby powder.

Cruise lines and hotels use signature aromas in their rooms and on the brochures mailed to guests after they go home, in hopes the scent will bring back memories of a pleasant vacation and spur repeat bookings.

Even nonprofit Goodwill Industries has gotten in on the act, using a custom-made orange and honey-suckle scent created by Prolitec Inc to sweeten the shopping at its thrift stores in Wisconsin and Illinois.

Research bears out the powerful influence of smell on behaviour, conference speakers said. Shoppers in a mall were more likely to help out a stranger in a pleasantly scented area than when the same area was unscented, said Jean-Charles Chebat, a marketing professor at the HEC Montreal business school.

Japan to ask Myanmar to join bilateral pact

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan's foreign minister will suggest that Myanmar enter negotiations on a bilateral investment accord when he holds talks with the country's top officials next week, Kyodo News reported on Sunday.

The talks would mark another step as Myanmar gradually reconnects with the rest of the world after decades of tight military rule.

A series of reforms have been initiated by President Thein Sein aimed at pushing for the lifting of decades of Western sanctions and attracting much-needed foreign investment in the country formerly known as Burma.

Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba is travelling to Myanmar on Sunday to meet his counterpart, Wunna Maung Lwin, as well as the president next week.

In Naypyitaw, Gamba will discuss the investment accord, which would promote cross-border investment and allow trade disputes to be settled under international frameworks, Kyodo said, citing a government source.

Gamba will also meet pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and will likely invite her to visit Japan in the near future, Kyodo said.

Gamba's visit is the first by a Japanese foreign minister in nine years.

In a landmark step, US President Barack Obama decided last month to open the door to expanded ties, saying he saw potential for progress in a country until recently seen as an isolated military dictatorship firmly aligned with China.

Afghanistan food aid at risk as donors trim support

REUTERS, Kabul

More Afghans will go hungry next year and may be dependent on food aid for longer as school feeding programmes and projects to develop the country's crumbling agriculture sector have to be trimmed due to waning donor support, the United Nations warned.

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) raised only about half its annual \$400 million Afghanistan budget in 2011, and even less was expected for 2012, Bradley Guarrant, the agency's deputy director for Afghanistan, said this week.

"We are planning for 45 percent (of a once projected \$400 million) for next year," Guarrant told Reuters in an interview.

Donor support had been cut on the back of global economic woes, and the WFP needs to prioritise given such a major shortfall.

Funds will be focused on emergency food assistance, support for the most vulnerable families, especially households headed by disabled people and women, and supplementary feeding programmes for malnourished children under five years old and pregnant women.

Other programmes meant to make

communities more food secure -- including agriculture schemes and a school feeding programme -- will have to be cut back, Guarrant said.

"We are making some very difficult decisions right now," he said.

Along with the government and other non-governmental groups, the WFP has been working on low-tech but high-return projects to improve irrigation in communities that open up new land for crops and make people less dependent on food assistance.

The agency has also sought to give farmers access to markets by buying their wheat or other products that form part of the WFP's food basket, although success has been mixed due to lack of surplus production or uncompetitive local prices.

Violence across Afghanistan has been at its worst since the hardline Islamist Taliban were toppled by U.S.-backed Afghan forces in late 2001, hampering access to food.

In 2010, the WFP lost some 22,000 tonnes of food aid that was being trucked into Afghanistan during catastrophic floods in Pakistan. A drought in the 2010/11 season has also put more people at risk and in need of food aid.



REUTERS

A protester of the occupy movement wears a Santa Claus costume as he walks through the occupy camp next to the euro sculpture outside the European Central Bank headquarters in Frankfurt's banking district on Saturday. Only a few protesters are left at the occupy camp over the Christmas holidays but others promised to return after spending Christmas evening with their families.