

## Just another day for homeless kids



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**BALTIMORE** - What's this? This? It's a column about the homeless. Another one? That's three in a row, isn't it? Yup. And now this — on Christmas Day? Yup, on Christmas Day. Especially on Christmas Day.

Especially if you think the story of a child born in a manger continues to mean something in a time when we have thousands of children homeless across rich, bountiful America.

They're out there, you know.

Earlier this year, the National Alliance to End Homelessness said there were 744,313 homeless people across the country. About 8,000 are in Maryland, the majority in Baltimore City and in Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

More than a thousand of Maryland's homeless are children.

Some of the children have parents who broke laws and never straightened out. Some of them slacked off instead of working. Some abused drugs or alcohol. Some have mental health problems. All of these are the stereotypes of the homeless, and in our rush to get on with our own lives, and our own problems, we lump their stories into one big cliché: It's their own fault; they made their own problems. Don't bother me; I've got problems of my own.

But some of these folks work for a living and didn't make enough money to keep up with the rent. Some were downsized; some laid off, some bought houses beyond their reach and couldn't keep up. They had honest intentions. Like a lot of us who still have homes, they were always one or two paychecks away from disaster.

(And, in the midst of trouble, some can't find affordable housing. A study last year by the National Low Income Housing Coalition called Maryland the seventh-most expensive jurisdiction in the nation.)

Their kids are paying the price.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, families account for nearly 40 percent of the nation's homeless. Forty percent of homeless children are under the age of 5.

You can see the kids at a place like Sarah's Hope, the Baltimore County shelter off Franklin Square Boulevard that's run by St. Vincent DePaul of Baltimore and supported through the Abraham's Tent Coalition and the Baltimore County Office of Community Conservation.

You walk through the place and see children everywhere, pre-schoolers to teens. This morning, they're unwrapping presents donated by big-hearted strangers. Tonight they'll sleep on mats on the floor, surrounded by other strangers.

You go to a place like Golden Ring Middle School, out there in northern Baltimore County, not far from Sarah's Hope.

This year, school officials say, they've had 26 homeless kids there.

In one school.

Out there in suburbia.

They show up one day, and some of them remain through the school year. Others stay for a few weeks, or a few months, and then they disappear. Sometimes the records from their previous school don't arrive until after the kids have already moved off again.

You think it's tough getting through school, with all its academic challenges and all the growing-up problems?

Try doing it when you have no place to call home.

"It's rough," says one educator at Golden Ring. "They arrive with all kinds of defense mechanisms. Maybe they're the class clown. Maybe they retreat into themselves. Some put up a wall of leave-me-alone. Some lash out physically. They'll initiate a fight so nobody messes with them after that. There are so many changes and inconsistencies in their lives that they'll suffer academically and fall behind and, when that happens, you have more behavior problems.

"Some of them will fall asleep in class. There was too much noise in the shelter. The grown-ups were up talking all night. We've had kids here who have slept on buses. The shelters are a place to sleep, but try doing homework in the midst of so many people.

"And they act out in class, and most of the teachers don't know they're dealing with a homeless kid. The kids just get dropped off, like the stork. The teachers don't know the history, it's confidential."

The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates 14 percent of homeless children have learning disabilities — double the rate of other children. They estimate that 21 percent of homeless children repeat a grade because of frequent absence from school. Within a single school year, 41 percent of them attend two different schools, and 28 percent attend three or more.

So that's your latest column on the homeless.

Three in a row.

On Christmas Day?

Yup.

Especially on Christmas Day.

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