

THOSE OTHER MISSING CHILDREN

by Congressman Henry A. Waxman*

The last several years have seen an extraordinary growth in public awareness of the problem of missing children. These cases are now publicized on grocery bags and milk cartons. Congress has established a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). Hollywood has dramatized the problem in the TV movie "Adam".

This swell of attention and energy has made a real difference. Law enforcement officials now treat these cases not simply as civil matters but potential crimes; myriad new clearinghouses and support groups have sprung up to help families; free publicity by businesses has helped solve long unresolved cases.

But there is another huge group of missing children worth our notice: those missing food, missing a place to live, missing health care--missing the essentials of a wholesome, decent life.

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As several news stories and commentators have recently pointed out, the numbers of children abducted are lower than one might think. The NCMEC, for example, says 1.5 million children a year are reported missing. But it estimates that only about 1% are actually abducted by strangers. Most of the rest--about two thirds--are runaways; a sizable minority are abducted by parents in custody disputes.

Child Find, a New York-based clearinghouse working on the problem, estimates that about 600 children a year are taken by strangers.

The California Department of Justice reports that in the last 20 years, no more than 13 California children under the age of 11 were abducted by strangers and remained missing more than a month.

Clearly, any missing child represents an incalculable tragedy--whether he or she has run away, been kidnapped by a parent, or abducted by a stranger. The people and groups working on their behalf merit our deep gratitude.

But what about children who are missing what they need to grow up physically and emotionally healthy? Their numbers are truly staggering.

Two government agencies recently reported that a record 13.8 million American children 18 and under--more than one in five--live in poverty. That child poverty rate has increased by two thirds since 1965.

Children of all backgrounds are included. In fact, the most dramatic recent rise in the child poverty rate is among white children in two-parent families. One in six white children in America live below the poverty line.

Poverty doesn't automatically ruin a child's life. But it makes severe hardships much more likely. Take the example of health insurance. Over eleven million children don't have it. Most are from "working poor" families with incomes above the cut-off point for federal help, yet who cannot afford private insurance. These children thus lack any health "safety net". They must do without basic check-ups and even treatment when they're sick.

Children now make up over one in five people in homeless shelters, excluding runaway shelters. The homeless used to be almost exclusively derelicts and mental patients. But long-term high unemployment and dwindling low-income housing stocks are increasingly pushing poor families with children into the streets.

Nearly thirty thousand children die every year before their first birthday--half the number of Americans killed in Vietnam. Many would live if their mothers could afford basic pre-natal care. In some metropolitan areas, infant mortality rates are comparable to those of Third World nations such as Costa Rica and Honduras.

Yet with more and more children in need, the federal government is doing less and less for them:

- Reagan administration eligibility changes in Medicaid--the program that pays for health care for certain poor people--have prevented over a million children from benefitting

- Housing subsidies have been drastically cut, accelerating the rate of new homelessness

- Programs that give nutritional advice and food to high-risk pregnant women, with funds to reach only one third of those in need, have been repeatedly targeted for reduction by the administration.

Societal breakdowns like inadequate health care, homelessness, and infant mortality--not to mention others like poor nutrition, poor education, and youth unemployment--attract no public relations campaigns, made-for-TV movies, or pictures on milk cartons. They lack the mystery and drama of a missing child. Yet because of their scale, the damage they are doing to our society is far worse.

The drive to find missing children shows what we can accomplish when we focus energy and commitment on a problem. If we are willing to search for helpless children, should we not also be willing to help care for them when we know where they are?