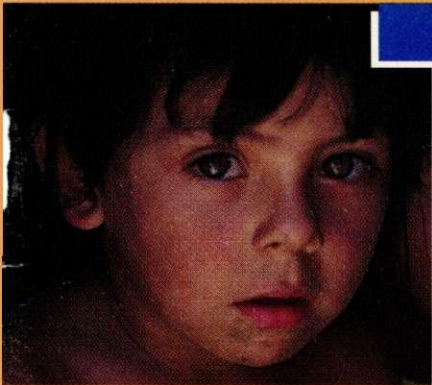


February / March 1994

WORLDVISION®

**Home-grown poverty
in the land of opportunity**

AMERICA'S THIRD WORLD



Of Ghosts and Corpses pg 16
Demonstrating the Kingdom pg 18

BY JAN JOHNSON

AMERICA'S THIRD WORLD

Home-grown poverty in the land of opportunity



The barefoot man maneuvers his bucket of water from the creek back to his dirt floor lean-to. Just inside these walls of scrap wood and road signs, a woman cooks at a stove she built from adobe mud. Does this couple live in Third World Asia, Africa, or South America? No. They live within the borders of the United States.

More and more people throughout the United States call chicken coops, old buses, railroad cars, and tar-paper shacks "home," because that's the only housing they can afford. The U.S. government defines the country's poverty level as \$12,675 per year for a family of four. But about 5 percent of the U.S. population earns less than half that.

In the areas where the poorest of the U.S. poor live, local hospitals are closing and few doctors practice. Their babies don't receive immunizations or health care. Among children who do go to school, the drop-out rate is high. Many people can't read and the few existing jobs pay poorly. Disease and crime shorten the life expectancy of adults. These conditions are typical of the Third World: inadequate housing, poor health care, high infant mortality rates, poor education, and shorter life spans.

Although this Third World-like poverty exists throughout the United States and affects all ethnic groups, five areas are highlighted in the following pages. In Appalachia, the impoverished are white. In California's heartland, Latinos labor on farms, while American Indians survive in the dry southwest. Nearly every ethnic group is counted among the poor of inner-city Chicago, while the impoverished in the Mississippi Delta are mostly black. These pockets of people are hidden to us because banks, stores, and manufacturing have fled these regions, and few people have reason to go there.

How could the "land of opportunity" include areas without the basics in living conditions? The shortage of moderately priced housing forces almost half the poor to spend 70 percent of their income on rent, so many live in homes without plumbing or electricity. The U.S. health care system leaves 37 million people without medical insur-

ance. Infants die at a higher rate in the United States than any other developed country. The U.S. educational system (combined with other influences) has produced 20 to 30 million functionally illiterate adults who cannot compete for jobs. Innocent people who live in high-crime areas die in cross fire.

What about public assistance? Some refuse it because they say it's demeaning; others find their impoverished counties don't have the tax base to support public programs; still others do receive it, but they're so far behind, it's not enough to catch up. A parent with a family of five and only 20 hours of minimum-wage work a week doesn't make enough to buy new shoes for the winter or move out of a tiny rusting trailer.

The ironies are baffling. Latino families who toil in the abundant farmland of central California go hungry. A laid-off coal miner whose work provided heat to millions of homes for years now can't afford heat for his own ramshackle house.

LOOKING FOR HOPE

Many of the poor live with dignity, joy, and a strong sense of community. Mothers kiss their babies, boys play basketball, and patches of bright flowers sprout from well-tended gardens. While some people are amazingly resilient, others give up. What chance does a child have who can't go to school because she doesn't have an address? What hope is there for a teen whose friends die from gang violence? How hopeful is the farm worker whose co-worker develops a pesticide-related disease?

Here and there, relief and development agencies work with these hidden people to build a home-grown economic base that will fuel more choices, more hope, and better living conditions. ☉



APPALACHIA: *Isolated from Prosperity*

While some coal miners' daughters have moved up and out of Appalachia, many coal miners' widows like Junie, 61, still live in its hollows along creeks and wandering roads. In her three-room shack without running water, she survives on social security, disability, and food stamps. Though she likes pointing down the road to the one-room school she attended as a child, she would leave Appalachia if she could afford it.

Appalachia reaches into 13 states from Pennsylvania to Alabama, where empty factories testify to the half million textile and apparel jobs that have been lost. In the heart of Appalachia, where seven states stack in a zigzag running north and south on the map, 30 percent of the population lives below the U.S. poverty level. And more than half live in poverty in places like Owsley County, Ky. At times, everyone in nearby Livingston has lived below the poverty level. There, 40 percent of the homes are substandard. The leaky trailers with sinking floors, and shacks with walls so full of holes that you can see through them, make the two-story home of television's Walton family look well-to-do.

Like most distressed regions, Appalachia has a two-tiered economy of "haves" and "have nots." The "haves"—mostly absentee owners like coal and timber corporations—own three-fourths of the region's land and minerals. To remain competitive, they lobby to keep taxes low, but this dries up funds for schools and public services. For example, in 1987, 12,420 children in West Virginia (the only state completely within Appalachia) who were eligible for Head Start were denied because of lack of funds—though one-third of the state's children are born in poverty.

While living standards have always been lower in Appalachia than other places, they've grown worse in recent

years. For more than 100 years, descendants of European settlers worked the region's mines for coal. Today, mines deep in the mountains in Harlan County, Ky., employ one-fifth of the number of miners they used to employ. Laid-off miners who lived in mine-owned housing search for places to live and something to do. But half of these mountain people dropped out of school, and a third of them are functionally illiterate.

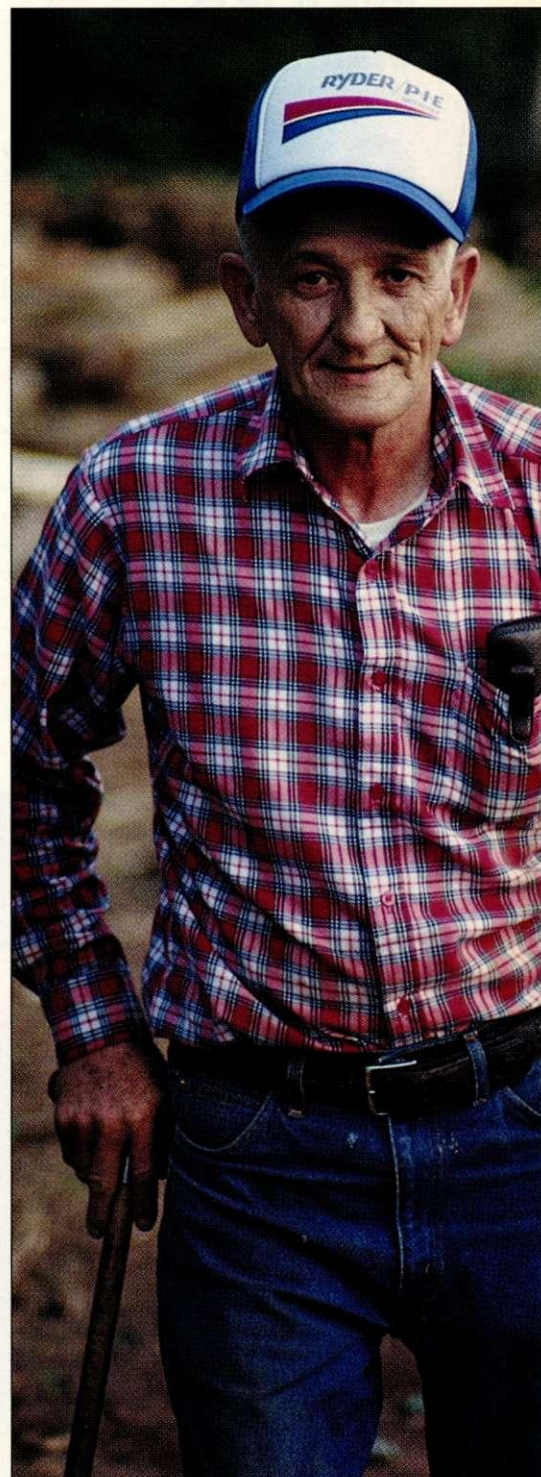
Out of pride and dignity, many refuse to take welfare. In this land of sparse rewards, messages on barns advertise hope: "Jesus is coming soon." Many people still hold frontier values: physical courage, loyalty to family, and devotion to land.

As much as half the water in southeastern Kentucky is contaminated from strip-mine run-off and inadequate solid-waste disposal. Many families pipe water to their homes from abandoned mines and complain that yellow scum comes to the top of the water when they boil it. Increasingly, land in Appalachia is being used for landfills and toxic waste dumps, further tainting the water supply.

More than 2,000 miles of mountain roads were built in the 1970s that, combined with a network of clinics established by the Appalachian Regional Commission, help residents get better medical care. While the infant mortality rate in 1960 was 30.9 deaths per thousand live births in eastern Kentucky, it was 8.8 in 1990. Yet in other distressed counties the infant mortality rate is still double that of the general population.

Various organizations are providing food pantries, clinics, home repair, and high school equivalency exam classes for the poor. A young mother in Owsley County has started her own T-shirt business with the help of the Commission on Religion in Appalachia and Workers in Rural Kentucky, Inc. She, in turn, helps these organizations in their other projects: a housing program, a child care center, a literacy program. Nearly every agency reports that a group approach works well in Appalachia, where many express this attitude: "It's not just me, but how can I help everybody?"

Puddin' Ridge, Jackson County, Alabama



DAVE JENKINS



INNER-CITY CHICAGO:

When Jobs Die

Chuck lives in an 8-foot cubicle with a chicken wire ceiling and plywood walls that separate him from 30 other men who sleep in adjoining compartments. Cockroaches crawl across his face at night and his mind churns with memories of neighbors who have died of booze, malnutrition, or old age. He still thinks about the 22-year-old kid who jumped out the bathroom window, hitting the fire escape before dying on the pavement below.

But Chuck has what many in inner-city Chicago don't have: a place to go every night. SRO (single-room occupancy) hotels like the one Chuck lives in have declined by 70 percent in recent years. So the most vulnerable of the poor—alcoholics, drug addicts, the mentally ill, those who lack friends and relatives to take them in—set up havens in burned-out

buildings and under freeway overpasses, using blankets for walls.

Living like this, the homeless have more than average medical problems, especially seizures and lung diseases. Yet thousands of inner-city Chicagoans have no health insurance and the few existing emergency clinics are overloaded and aren't designed for preventive or diagnostic health care.

Limited health care also results in a higher infant mortality rate, which in Chicago is 15.2 deaths per 1,000 live births, and 23 among blacks (the nationwide rate is 9.9). A hospital in south-side Jackson Park reports that more than 45 percent of the babies born there are either addicted to cocaine or test positive for HIV. Education in inner-city Chicago doesn't provide the boost it could because 47 percent of the students drop out, compared with 26 percent nationally.

Families fracture easily in the inner city. Young fathers feel they have no value as husbands because they don't have the skills to get jobs that support a family. By living in the home, these fathers deprive

wives and children of welfare. So they leave or turn to the alternative high-income job: crime. Drug dealers are major employers of young men in inner-city Chicago.

The high crime rate further reduces life expectancy. Although statistics for inner-city Chicago are unknown, the life expectancy of black men in Harlem, New York, is 46, lower than many Third World nations racked by famine and civil war.

How did inner cities become so desolate? In the 1940s, south-side Grand Boulevard area of Chicago was a mecca for blacks, with jazz clubs, fancy shops, and department store chains. But as the steel mills closed and the stockyards moved, residents had little money to spend in neighborhood stores, which rapidly failed. When federal job programs were cut in the 1980s, it hurt both poor and middle-class blacks employed by the programs. Almost 2,300 jobs were lost in the two zip codes that cover Grand Boulevard. By 1990 almost one in five black men in Chicago was unemployed.

Inner-city Chicago

Black churches are the primary developers of low-income housing in many of Chicago's inner-city neighborhoods. Bethel New Life (a partner of World Vision) found applicants who are making down payments of \$500 and pledging to work 750 hours on building their home and homes for others in their cooperative. A man who used to raid coal bins to provide heat for his run-down apartment reported that his new home had the "best heat in Chicago."

Bethel New Life has also put people to work in businesses it has started—a sewing business run by minority women and a trash-for-cash recycling program. This group has managed to find resources in an area where others thought there were none.

DOUG DUDLEY / WORLD VISION





CALIFORNIA MIGRANT FARM WORKERS:

*Laboring and Living
Under the Blue Sky*

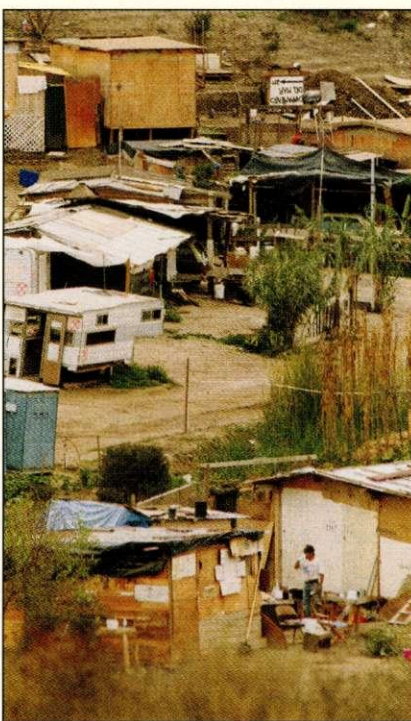
As Armando pruned tomatoes in the fields of the Sacramento Valley, a crop duster sprayed him and other workers with pesticide. Although he became partially blind, his bosses did nothing. He applied for Medi-Cal, but was turned away. He kept working in the fields, where he was yelled at because he missed picking vegetables he couldn't see. After four years, he earned enough money to go to a doctor in Mexico, who restored his vision.

Near highways from Los Angeles to San Francisco are back roads full of jarring Third-World-like scenes. Surviving on an average annual wage of \$5,000, many migrant farm workers, mostly Latino, live in cardboard shantytowns by river banks or in cars tucked deep in the brush. They wash their clothes in muddy rivers and cook over open fires at the edge of dirt fields. A 1990 study found that more than a third of the farm-worker families in four central California counties faced severe hunger, skipping meals regularly.

Although agriculture is California's biggest industry, and it soared by more than 30 percent in the '80s, living conditions declined for those who plant, tend, and harvest America's fruits and vegetables. Gains made by the United Farm Workers union have been lost as desperate workers, willing to work for any amount, migrate north. Their wages have dropped to minimum wage again, with employers often deducting money for food, tools, transportation (\$3 to \$5 for a ride to the field), and rent. One grower charged workers \$20 a night to sleep under a tree in his backyard.

The California Rural Legal Assistance is pressing cases of slavery-style treatment of workers. Government cutbacks have reduced the number of inspectors to mon-

DON BARTLETT



*Migrant squatters camp,
San Diego County, California*

itor labor contractors, some of whom no longer furnish toilets and drinking water in the fields though the law requires it. Some are again hiring children who don't mind climbing rickety ladders.

Farm work can be dangerous and back-breaking. Forty farm workers died and more than 22,000 suffered disabling injuries in California fields in 1990. Laborers face continual low-level exposure to pesticides in drinking water and blowing dust, and they worry about cancer and future reproductive problems. Yet workers' compensation, Social Security, and unemployment compensation aren't always available to them, and most workers are no longer eligible for Medi-Cal. Sixty five percent of Latino farm workers have no health insurance, four times more than the national average.

The life expectancy of migrant farm workers nationwide is only 49 years (compared with 75.2 for the general population) and their infant mortality rate is higher than average. Hunger and malnutrition contributes to widespread anemia and infection. AIDS is increasing among farm workers faster than the general population, as is tuberculosis, which when combined with AIDS, usually causes death in less than four months.

Educating children is difficult for migrants because schools require permanent addresses and immunization records. So the children of many migrants often stay shut up in cars all day at the edge of the fields.

Hate crimes teach migrants to stay out of sight. Recently, a Latino farm worker was beaten, tied, and forced to wear a bag over his head on which was written in broken Spanish, "Get out of here."

Ministries to migrant farm workers are difficult because many move as each crop matures. North County Chaplaincy in northern San Diego County offers emergency food and clothing and assists workers with immigration problems and wage disputes. "They work hard, but they don't know the language or the culture," says Director Dr. Rafael Martinez. "We help them speak up for themselves."

WORLD VISION IN AMERICA'S THIRD WORLD

Appalachian region: World Vision is working in a 12-county area in Appalachian Eastern Kentucky with funds granted by Pew Charitable Trusts. World Vision has developed a network of 17 ministries (churches and parachurch organizations) for mutual training and encouragement in developmental ministry to the poor.

Indian reservations: World Vision is renovating the Casa Blanca Day school at the Gila River Indian Reservation in Arizona through a joint, private-sector initiative with the Department of the Interior. World Vision provides volunteer labor, management and gifts-in-kind building materials, books, children's clothing, and shoes.

Inner-city Chicago: Vision Chicago provides housing and jobs for struggling families in the inner city as well as assistance and counseling to at-risk youth. In collaboration with other organizations, Vision Chicago strengthens the community development programs of existing churches through volunteer programs, technical assistance, organizing activities, leadership development, and investment of dollars and donated materials. Starting with 15 congregations in the Lawndale area, Vision Chicago seeks to mobilize more churches to work in partnership throughout Chicago for the families of the inner city.

Lower Mississippi Delta: Three years ago, the project director for Habitat for Humanity in Coahoma County, Miss., asked World Vision to team up with them to construct homes for the poor. World Vision invested almost \$120,000 in materials and provided a consultant to coordinate volunteers. Since then, volunteer teams built 28 homes with plans for 35 more. World Vision continues to recruit volunteer church teams to travel to Coahoma County to build affordable homes.



NAVAJOS: *Thirsting for Identity*

Tourists visiting the Navajo reservation sprawling through Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, expect to see weathered Indians sitting by teepees, holding tomahawks. More typical are Tony and Venita, a Navajo couple dressed in jeans, living in a two-room cinderblock house miles outside of town. They herd sheep, which wander in search of water and vegetation on this harshly beautiful, but overgrazed plateau.

Using income from the rugs, blankets, belts, and jewelry Venita makes, they buy gas for the dented, dusty truck they use to corral the sheep. Every few days, they drive the truck 15 miles through gullies and potholes to a spigot that sticks out of the ground near the post office. There they fill barrels with water for themselves and the sheep.

Some of their children attend the same Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school that Venita attended. She remembers being "cleansed" from lice with kerosene and learning that caring for sheep and creating beautiful things were not as important as owning cars and television sets. She quit school and returned to her traditional Navajo family who lived in a hogan—a dome-shaped dwelling made of logs and adobe mud, with a dirt floor. Tony is now building a modern hogan—an octagon-shaped log home, in which he hopes to put a cement floor.

Tony and Venita are among the half of this Navajo nation with an income below the poverty level, and among the two-thirds of adults who aren't high school graduates. They narrowly escaped being among the 38 percent who are unemployed.

Almost half of all Navajos don't have running water or electricity because they don't have the money to get these services to their scattered homes. The American Medical Association Journal described Navajo health conditions as "generally alarming," though the infant

mortality rate has improved from 31.4 in 1970 to 9.4 in 1989. The life expectancy rate of Navajos is only 3.3 years less than whites, but the rate at which Navajos die because of alcohol is six times higher.

Those caught in the Hopi-Navajo land disputes face the most difficult conditions. For two decades, the government has forced almost 10,000 Navajos to move. Many refused to relocate, however, so the government put a freeze on building and repairs to persuade them to move. After 16 years, some of their hogans are half gone with plastic pulled over them to keep the snow out in this high country—as high as the Grand Canyon. Only 10 percent of the homes in this area have running water and electricity. The health station there is minimally staffed and open only part time, though the birth rate is high in these large families.

The land disputes are rooted in Kit Carson's forced march of 8,500 Navajos from their homeland to Fort Sumner, N.M., in 1863. The Navajos were eventually assigned to a reservation, but the

carelessly drawn borders have resulted in repeated land disputes among Hopis, Navajos, and government agencies.

Today, half of this 220,000-member nation is younger than 19 years old and many are troubled. They must leave the reservation to find jobs, but they don't feel confident enough to compete for them. Compared with the general U.S. adolescent population, four times as many Navajo teens attempt suicide and 10 times as many die because of alcohol. But those who do thrive and graduate from college, especially medical and legal professionals, often return to the reservation to work.

Many aid agencies are offering more than food and clothing, and are helping to streamline dealings with the federal government. World Vision workers have tried to help Navajos complete bureaucratic tasks so they can start their own businesses, build their own churches, and improve their own schools. This approach offers a sorely lacking commodity: respect.

Big Mountain Navajo reservation, Arizona





LOWER MISSISSIPPI DELTA:

Flowing with Despair

Ancient civilizations grew along powerful rivers like the Tigris and Euphrates because they provided rich soil for crops. Like those areas, the lower Mississippi River valley has seen centuries of water crest and recede, leaving in its flood plain as much as 25 feet of topsoil.

Today, the Mississippi Delta nourishes millions of acres of cotton, rice, and soybeans, providing a living for some—but not all. The palatial homes of wealthy landowners stand within the 10 poorest counties in the United States. Down the road from these homes are shacks resembling doghouses.

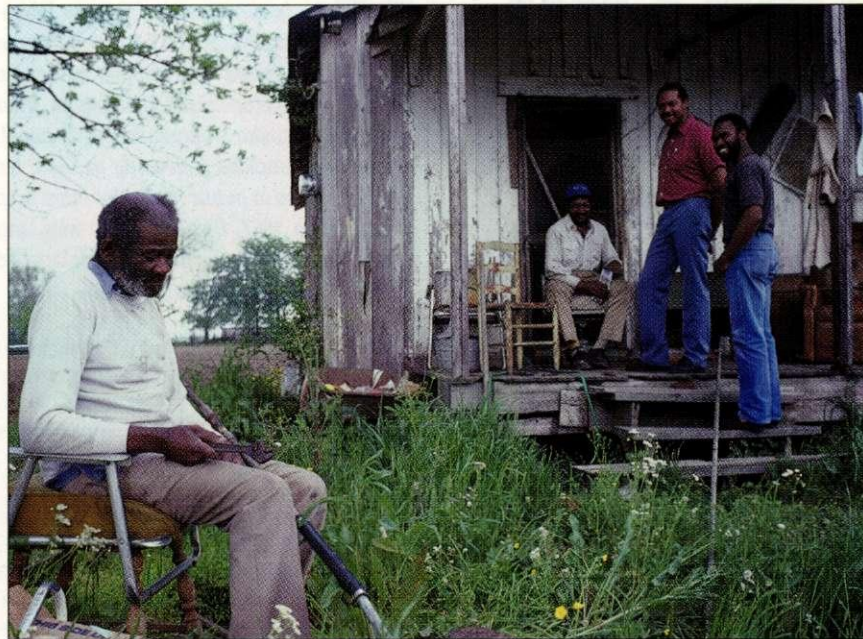
Years ago, the plantations attracted thousands of laborers, but tractors, combines, and cotton harvesting machines replaced them. Some former workers settled in shanty towns nearby.

In these rural communities along the Mississippi River, from Cairo, Ill., to the Gulf of Mexico, roughly 30 percent of the people live below the poverty level. In the strip from Memphis to Vicksburg, more than 50 percent—black and white alike—live in poverty.

In towns with names like Coahoma, Issaquena, and Tallahatchie, many are unemployed or underemployed. Even minimum-wage, full-time jobs are hard to find.

Mary, a single mother of two, lives in a tiny sharecropper cabin that looks deserted. She dreams of working as a secretary, answering telephones, but she needs transportation. The nearest town to her shack community is 16 miles across dirt roads and fields. It's even farther to the nearest clinic, which is why her daughters don't have their immunization shots. Mary gets by on food stamps and \$96 a month from the government.

A third of the homes in the Delta lack either plumbing or heating. In Coahoma



MARK SANDLIN / HOME MISSION BOARD, SBC

County, Miss., 80 percent of the homes are considered substandard. Roofs and front porches sag, and walls are so full of dry rot they provide little protection from freezing winter drafts and sweltering summer heat.

Many of these communities are unincorporated, so they don't have the resources for water and sewage systems. Residents collect rain water or haul water from nearby creeks, which are usually contaminated with sewage and pesticides.

Hospitals, doctors, and nurses are few and hard to find. In some counties, no obstetrical services are available. Inadequate prenatal and postnatal care helps explain the Delta's high infant mortality rates. In Humphreys County, Miss., three times more babies die before their first birthday than is typical in the U.S. population. Infant mortality in Humphreys County is higher than Third World countries like Chile, Cuba, and Malaysia.

There are few public schools, and those are underfunded. One of every four adolescents drops out of high school and one of every five adults is illiterate. Some call the Delta a rural ghetto with crime, drug dealing, and 23-year-old grandmothers.

In this world of "haves" and "have nots," the "have nots" are blamed because federal money like welfare accounts for 70 percent of income in many communities. Others note that the federal government spends much more on the huge farm subsidies received by the landowners.

While congressional representatives work to attract businesses to the area, organizations like Habitat for Humanity (with help from World Vision) build homes. Each owner puts in 500 hours of "sweat equity" and makes low payments on a no-interest loan. Habitat uses this seed money for more homes and loans for small businesses in the Delta area.

But is a house enough? "As people move into places that aren't falling apart, it sets the stage for taking on challenges," says World Vision consultant Karin Kennedy. "The next step might be seeking job training, or their children not dropping out of high school. These changes feel too risky when you're just trying to get through the day. Hope increases as choices increase." ☉

Jan Johnson is a free-lance writer in Simi, Calif.