



HOUSING AND LAND RIGHTS NETWORK

Habitat International Coalition

Open Letter to President George W. Bush

Cairo-Delhi-Geneva-Mexico City-Nairobi, 4 October 2004

George W. Bush
President of the United States of America
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Dear Mr. President:

On this World Habitat Day, the Coordination Office of the Habitat International Coalition's Housing and Land Rights Network (HIC-HLRN) and its worldwide member organizations express deepest concern about your administration's intended cuts in the so-called Section 8 voucher program in the current and forthcoming U.S. federal budgets. Retreating from support of that housing subsidy program will deepen the shortage of affordable housing in the United States, particularly at a time when homelessness across the country is spreading in a worrisome pattern.

Section 8 vouchers protect impoverished Americans from paying more than 30% of their income in rent. Your proposed housing budget, if adopted, would mark the first cut in the 30-year history of Section 8 voucher program. To deal with the proposed withholding of support, the housing agencies that provide the poor families with vouchers will have to disqualify 250,000 families from the program next year, or force them to pay about \$850 more in rent per family in 2005, and \$2,000 more by 2009. This, Mr. President, is the fate you prescribe for these American families, most of whom already live well below the poverty line.

The Section 8 program makes housing possible for two million needy people. Over 30% of these people are elderly or disabled, and 46% are families of "working poor." Your Administration calls for reducing by more than \$1.6 billion (or 30%) the 2005 budget of Section 8 assistance, with the target of a \$4.6 billion cut by 2009.

Such a social policy is even more shocking in the light of other policy preferences. Homeland Security notwithstanding, the U.S. defense spending has never been higher than now. You have raised the base budget of the Department of Defense from \$296.8 billion in 2000 to \$401.7 billion in the 2005 budget, representing a 35% increase under your term as president, also not including the yet-undisclosed 2005 costs anticipated for US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹ What you propose to take from this one housing-subsidy program in 2005 are equivalent to less than 15% of the \$10.7 billion

¹ White House budget director Joshua Bolten estimated that another \$50 billion would be needed to cover war costs next year, but that the Bush Administration expects to seek those supplemental funds after the 2004 general elections. Dean Brown, "Defense budget doesn't include funds for Iraq, Afghanistan," *Knight Ridder Newspapers* (2 February 2004), <http://www.realcities.com/mld/kwashington/7858468.htm>.

that your administration has spent this year alone on your failed and under-reported ballistic missile program, for which you abrogated the long-sought and hard-won 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty.

The proposed Section 8 cuts are indicative of a misplaced social priorities and augur further deprivation for the neediest Americans. Consider that your \$4 billion in 2001 tax cuts for the highest 1% income earners in the United States would largely cover the cost of the entire Section 8 services for the American poor next year. If your proposed tax cuts for those same rich Americans were to proceed as planned through 2009 (equaling \$85 billion), that single loss to the national treasury would be equivalent to nearly 20 times the amount needed to restore the Section 8 cuts you seek for that year.²

The Bush Administration regressive budget proposal is not rationalized by decreasing need, foregoing success at eradicating poverty, or problems with the program. Most troubling is your administration's attempt to undermine the Section 8 program, despite its full funding and continued support by the US Congress. Your administration also has instituted administrative changes aimed at penalizing housing authorities that have done a good job in the past by making unjustified, retroactive budget cuts; inexplicable reductions in Section 8 Fair Market Rents in many markets; and punitive, unconstitutional raids on alleged program violators designed to discredit the program and "criminalize" the poor.

The major cause of homelessness in the United States is the 4.7 million-unit shortage of affordable housing for low-income renters. Your plan for 2005–09 slashes an already-insufficient voucher program for the most-impooverished and most-vulnerable Americans, raining down on them the terror of losing their homes and living in squalor or, increasingly, in the streets.

Already, according to a January 2004 report of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP),³ at least 840,000 people are homeless at any given day across the United States. More than 3.5 million Americans will experience homelessness in a given year; 1.35 million of these will be children. Almost half of the American homeless work full-time or part-time, while no one person working full-time at the minimum wage anywhere in the United States could afford to pay for adequate housing. Almost one in seven households is at risk, with 14.3 million of them spending more than 50% of their incomes just for housing.

Adding to the deprivation and suffering under which these people live, they are criminalized for their status in many cities across the United States. Moreover, they are civilly penalized by the potential loss of their voting rights. This threat affects 2.1 impoverished citizens—60% of homeless Americans are of voting age—who face obstacles fulfilling the residency and documentation requirements that many states impose by law to register and cast their ballots. A recent U.S. Conference of Mayors survey revealed that homeless Americans are 50% African-American, 40% families with children and 66% single-parent families, while 44% work and still have no roof. Your administration's policy, therefore, effectively seeks to increase the double discrimination against millions of Americans, vitiating their human right to adequate housing and living conditions, while expanding the category of disenfranchised voters.

By slashing social programs, your anti-Section 8 housing policy further underscores the U.S. government's failure to recognize the human right to adequate housing, even though half of the federal states' constitutions embody that right. The United States is already the only developed country in the world that has failed to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which enshrine the human right to adequate housing. This includes the right of all women, men and children to gain and sustain a secure place to live in peace and dignity. Your Section 8 cuts especially would violate the affected people's entitlements to legal security of tenure; affordability, which is the core reason for homelessness in your country; accessibility; capacity building;

² "Effects of the 2001-Enacted Bush Tax Cuts, Calendar 2001 to 2010," on Citizens for Tax Justice website: <http://www.ctj.org/html/gwb0602.htm> and <http://websearch.money.cnn.com/search/search?source=money&invocationType=search%252Ftop&query=Bush+tax+cuts+rich&sites=web&search.x=31&search.y=11>.

³ NLCHP is a member of HIC-HLRN based in Washington. Its report, entitled *Homelessness in the United States and the Human Right to Housing*, is available on <http://www.nlchp.org/>.

and physical security. All are elements of the human right to adequate housing recognised in international law, which States are to ensure under the overriding principles of rule of law and nonregressivity, but also gender equality and nondiscrimination.

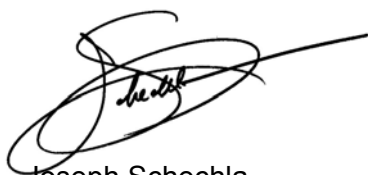
The UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing has emphasized the principle of the indivisibility of rights. The growing homeless in the United States provides a case in point: as a consequence of homelessness, the erosion of housing-rights entitlements also carries with it the simultaneous disenfranchisement of voters and the annulment of their civil right to democratic participation.

Accordingly, your government risks violating State obligations under articles 1, 21, 22 and 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which the United States ratified on 8 September 1992. Your policy toward the American poor would make the United States derelict in upholding the human rights norms codified under, *inter alia*, articles 2, 4, 7 and 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which most of the civilized world already has ratified and incorporated into their domestic law. Your government also risks violating State obligations under articles 1, 21, 22 and 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which the United States ratified on 8 September 1992. Your Section 8 program cuts also violate the U.S. commitments progressively to realize the universal right to adequate housing, which it joined at United Nation Habitat II and Habitat II + 5 conferences.

In light of the serious moral and legal issues at stake, we urge you to cancel the ill-conceived proposals to cut social programs of the coming budget and take the necessary measures to *reverse* the terror of actual and looming homelessness facing so many impoverished Americans. These corrective actions include fully funding the Section 8 program as a priority.

We thank you in advance for your careful consideration of this serious matter. We also look forward to receiving information regarding the measures that your government has taken to reverse its regressive Section 8 policy.

Sincerely,



Joseph Schechla

Coordinator

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