

[PRINT THIS PAGE](#)

## Ken Williams: Childhood Poverty Speaks Volumes about Our Culture, Society and Nation

[http://www.noozhawk.com/noozhawk/article/091910\\_ken\\_williams/](http://www.noozhawk.com/noozhawk/article/091910_ken_williams/)

By Ken Williams, Noozhawk Columnist

By allowing these conditions to persist, we chip away at our future

### Canaries

In years past, miners would take canaries with them into the mines. The tiny lungs of these small birds were highly susceptible to the deadly gases that were undetectable to humans. Without a warning system of some kind, the mine gases could build to explosive levels. If the canaries should keel over, the miners had minutes to escape before the gas would explode, destroying the mine and everyone in it.



Ken Williams and his dog, Sampson. (Williams family photo)

For years, the homeless have served the same function for anyone who cared to witness their lonely struggle for existence. When we turned our backs to the legions of the mentally ill who were forced to live and die on the streets without treatment, without shelter of any kind, it was a warning. When the physically disabled were forced to the streets because of an inadequate health-care industry that denied life-saving services to those who could not afford insurance, we allowed dangerous social pressures to build. When children exchanged a soft and warm bed to live among strangers in shelters, it was another deadly step on an immoral journey. When Death galloped through our community and stole our neighbors who were homeless from us and, again, we turned a blind eye, it was a glimpse of things to come.

*In my daughter's eyes ...  
I see who I wanna be.  
... everyone is equal.  
Darkness turns to light.*

— Martina McBride, [“In My Daughter’s Eyes”](#)

[Martina McBride’s](#) song is about how she sees who she is in the reflection in her daughter’s eyes. McBride is an incredible woman, a great singer and a teller of hard truths. Listening to this song, I wondered how our children see us, how future generations will see us — and judge our inaction. Today’s headlines screamed the horrible news — which really isn’t new at all if we had simply looked and listened — the tragedy of homelessness in our community as the forerunner of what was to be.

- » Overall poverty rate: 14.3 percent
- » Poverty rate among blacks: 25.8 percent
- » Poverty rate among Hispanics: 25.3 percent
- » Poverty rate in California: 15.3 percent
- » Uninsured rate: 16.7 percent

(Source: Census Bureau)

According to the [Census Bureau](#), 43.6 million Americans now live in poverty — a rate not seen since the 1960s. And most disheartening of all, the poverty rate of children — our children — is now 21 percent. That is, one-in-five children in our country now live in poverty. They go to bed hungry, sleep in substandard housing, stand out in schools wearing old and thread-worn clothes, and suffer the damage to their young and fragile sense-of-self. If I could see that child that McBride sings about, looking up at me and seeing my reflection in her innocent eyes ... I shudder to think what she would think of me.

These shameful rates are caused by a combination of factors. When I hear of concern of the runaway national debt, which I share, I wonder why the \$3 trillion that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will cost us is never addressed. Not only do these wars cost us our most precious national resource — the lives of our sons and daughters — it bleeds the wealth of our country when we can ill afford it. [President Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) said it so much better than I:

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched ... signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending ... the hopes of its children.”



**VILLAGE PROPERTIES**  
— REALTORS —  
[WWW.VILLAGESITE.COM](http://WWW.VILLAGESITE.COM)

What would Eisenhower say about the \$711 billion — almost half of the total world outlay for national

armaments — that we spent in 2008? The [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank, estimates that we could save \$125 billion if we brought our war troops home and another \$100 billion by “eliminating other unnecessary overseas missions.” Last time I looked, a quarter-trillion dollars would go a long way in reducing the national debt and providing funding to address the causes of poverty.

This is not the country I enlisted in the [Marines](#) to protect so many years ago. True, the reasons given then turned to lies in the fire and blood of Vietnam, but the dream of America, a just and caring country, moved me deeply then as it does now. It is the dream that we care and protect our children above all else. It is the dream that we would never tolerate this national nightmare of childhood poverty.

I refuse to give up my dream of our country even though my head lowers in shame when the best we can do in a national political dialogue is rather that the rich and super-rich should be given a \$700 billion tax break. Where is the discourse on helping our fellow countrymen, women and children in their time of despair? Where is the demand that the 95,000 fellow citizens who lost their homes to foreclosure in August alone be helped?

Here’s an idea: Why doesn’t every representative and senator sign a pledge that if they don’t cut the unemployment rate to 6 percent from the current 9.8 percent, they won’t run for re-election; that if they don’t cut the poverty rate below 10 percent and the foreclosure rate by half, they will look for another job? I would suggest that our children deserve nothing less.

## **Ruth Died**

[Ruth, a 74-year-old wheelchair-bound woman died earlier this month](#). I recently learned of another death, on State Street. John died at the beginning of August. He and Ruth were the 23rd and 24th homeless people to die this year.

— *Ken Williams has been a social worker for the homeless for the past 30 years. He is the author of China White and Shattered Dreams, A Story of the Streets.*

[http://www.noozhawk.com/noozhawk/article/091910\\_ken\\_williams/](http://www.noozhawk.com/noozhawk/article/091910_ken_williams/)