Prayer and Reflection

**OPENING PRAYER**
O God of the child and the child prostitute,
Of the child of rapture and the child of rape,
Of run-away or thrown-away children,
Who struggle every day without parents or place or friend or future,
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

**REFLECTION**
Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.
Matthew 18:5

Special attention must be devoted to the children by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity and a great respect and generous concern for their rights. This is true of every child, but it becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more she or he is in need of everything, when she or he is sick, suffering or handicapped. By fostering and exercising a tender and strong concern for every child that comes into this world, the Church fulfills a fundamental mission: for She is called upon to reveal and put forward anew in history the example and the commandment of Christ the Lord, who placed the child at the heart of the kingdom of God: “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*

There exists the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted at the United Nations in 1989 and already signed by many States, including the Holy See. I hope that more and more States will ensure the juridical force and practical application of the Convention, so that no child on earth will be left without the legal guarantee of his or her fundamental rights.


What message does the New Testament convey about the value of every child? What message do we receive from Catholic Social Teaching?

**CLOSING PRAYER**
O Creator,
We praise You for we are awesomely and wonderfully made.
We thank You for the children, who are born with such purity and such possibility.
Our children need Your help, Lord, for too many of them are lost to violence.
Our children need Your healing, Lord, for too many of them are hungry and sick.
We ask for the awakening of our children to the peace of which they are capable, to the justice which is their birthright, to the love which is their greatest need, to the unity which it is their task to create in this world.

Help the children to remember that they are, each and every one, a reflection of the Divine, a mirror of Your virtues in this world.

Help us all to remember who we really are, that in this new era, we may be mindful that we are all Your children, and that we can create a heaven here on earth of Peace, of Justice, of Love, of Unity, of abiding Joy.

Activites

Please note: This unit on Children’s Rights does not refer to the recent problems related to inappropriate relationships between clergy and young people. This topic may well come up in discussions of Children’s Rights, and we advise that the topic be discussed with openness as well as sensitivity. You may want to focus the discussion on ways to ensure that the rights of children and young people are recognized and respected throughout the church, by clergy and laity.

These activities are designed to take place over two sessions. Please feel free to adapt them to meet your needs.

OBJECTIVES
1. To demonstrate that many of the world’s children are not enjoying the rights guaranteed to them under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
2. To raise awareness of the emphasis the Gospels and Catholic Social Teaching place on the importance of children.

MATERIALS NEEDED
1. Case Studies on Children, Pages 3 - 7
2. Gospel Values and Catholic Social Teaching, Page 8
4. Fact Sheets on Children, Pages 10-15

DIRECTIONS

Session I
1. Break the participants into small groups, and have each group select a representative to report back to the large group. Note: There are only five case study topics for this exercise, so there should be no more than five small groups.
2. Distribute one case study to each group.
3. Instruct each small group to read their case study and answer the accompanying questions.
4. Instruct a representative from each small group to summarize their case study and their responses to the questions.
5. Distribute a copy of “Gospel Values and Catholic Social Teaching on Children” and “The Convention on the Rights of the Child” to each participant. Discuss how the children in the case studies were:
   a.) denied their dignity as children of God, and
   b.) denied the rights guaranteed to them under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

6. Optional: Assign the following reflection:

   Put yourself in the shoes of a person from one of the case studies. Write a page expressing what a day is like for you. What did you experience during the day? How do you feel physically and emotionally? What are your fears? What are your hopes and dreams for the future? Have a few volunteers read their reflection to the group.

Session II
1. Break the participants into new small groups. Distribute one fact sheet (there are a total of six fact sheets) to each group and instruct them to read and discuss the facts. Have a representative from each group report the findings of the fact sheet to the larger group. Why are these facts important?
2. Discuss the participants’ reactions to the fact sheets. Are they surprised? Incredulous? Do they feel the problem is too widespread to overcome, or are they motivated to work for change?
3. Discuss how the message of the Gospel and/or Catholic Social Teaching contributes to the struggle for children’s rights. How are people challenged by the message of Christ and the Church regarding children?

FURTHER ACTIVITIES
Follow up with the longer case study, “To Be Young and Homeless,” on pages 16-17. Also, read the fact sheet about the UN Special Session on Children on page 18.

See pages 19 and 20 for further activities and resources.
LUI

Lui is a 15-year-old uneducated Laotian girl. A woman in her village named Jai suggested she work in a factory in Bangkok. Lui’s family is very poor. Jai claimed that Lui could earn 3000 baht ($75) per month working in a factory in Bangkok. Lui’s mother said she should go, and she paid for the travel cost. Jai took Lui to a house in Bangkok where there were many Laotian girls waiting for employers to select them. A few days later, Ladda, the owner of a garment factory, took Lui to her factory.

Most of the workers in the factory were children between 12-15 years. They came from Laos and Burma. They had to work from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. Sometimes they had to work till midnight. They had three meals per day and slept on the floor in the working room. They couldn’t relax, laugh, or talk with each other. The owners of the factory supervised the children to make sure they worked hard enough. They could not rest, even when they were very tired. Children who broke the rules were beaten. They did not have holidays and never received any salary. They were not allowed to go outside the factory. On Sundays, they received 70 baht ($1.75) so they could buy some necessary things, such as soap or a toothbrush at a small shop besides the factory under the supervision of the employer.

One child ran away because she was beaten very badly and she reported it to the police. After that, all the children including Lui were rescued. These children were detained and fined for their illegal entry before being deported.

Discussion Questions
1. A child laborer may have made the clothes you wear. How does this personal dimension affect your reaction to the case study and/or poem?

2. Why do you think factory owners choose to use children as workers? Are children more or less vulnerable than adults? Are they more or less willing to obey commands? How do their wages compare to those of adults?

3. Who benefits from the structures and systems which allow child labor to exist? What needs to be changed so the problem of child labor can be solved? What role can you play?

4. What factors led to Lui’s imprisonment in the sweatshop?
Case Study
Sexual Exploitation of Children

RACHEL
Rachel, 16, from Benin City, Nigeria, was approached by a man and asked if she would like to go abroad and earn money by selling cosmetics. She agreed and was taken to Italy via Ghana.

Once in Italy she was taken to a house and forced into prostitution. The madam at the house, Agnes, told Rachel that she owed 90 million lire for her travel expenses, and that she would be expected to pay it back at the rate of 300,000 ($132) per day. She would also have to pay 50,000 lire ($22) a month for room and board and 200,000 lire ($90) to rent the corner where she would wait for customers.

The going rate for a sexual act in Italy was 30,000 lire ($13), which meant Rachel had to have sex with at least ten partners per day in order to make her daily repayment to Agnes. If Rachel did not make 300,000 lire per day, Agnes would beat her. She was forced to work 22 hours per day on the street, and she never made more than 150,000 lire per day. She was repeatedly beaten into submission, until she finally managed to escape with the help of a local non-profit organization.


Discussion Questions
1. Why do you think children and adolescents are so often used in the sex industry? Are children more or less vulnerable than adults? Are they more or less willing to obey commands?
2. What led to Rachel’s abduction? What are the structures and systems which allow things like this to happen?
3. Who benefits from the structures and systems which allow this exploitation to go on? What needs to be changed so that the sexual exploitation of children is stopped? What role can you play?
4. How do these cases demonstrate the wide spread problem of violence against women around the world?
5. One of the consequences of the combination of poverty and violence is that young people have very low expectations about the future. What are some of the long-term physical, emotional, and psychological effects these girls face as a result of these intrusive acts of violence brought upon them? How will this effect their future families?

CHAM
Cham is a pseudonym for a 15-year-old Cambodian girl who looks about 10. She ran away from her rural home after her stepmother repeatedly beat her. On her way home, she was befriended by a woman who promised her a job in a restaurant. Instead, the woman sold Cham to the owner, whose restaurant was a brothel.

The first night, she was forced to go with three men, who took turns raping her. Distraught and sobbing, Cham was then locked in a room where she was to entertain five to 10 men a day. If she refused, the owner tortured her with an electric shock. Three times, she tried to kill herself. A month went by. One evening Cham told her story to a sympathetic client who then turned her over to police. The police took her to an NGO’s children’s trauma center, where she is learning to be a seamstress and hopes to be reunited with her family.


Discussion Questions
1. Why do you think children and adolescents are so often used in the sex industry? Are children more or less vulnerable than adults? Are they more or less willing to obey commands?
2. What led to Rachel’s abduction? What are the structures and systems which allow things like this to happen?
3. Who benefits from the structures and systems which allow this exploitation to go on? What needs to be changed so that the sexual exploitation of children is stopped? What role can you play?
4. How do these cases demonstrate the wide spread problem of violence against women around the world?
5. One of the consequences of the combination of poverty and violence is that young people have very low expectations about the future. What are some of the long-term physical, emotional, and psychological effects these girls face as a result of these intrusive acts of violence brought upon them? How will this effect their future families?
Case Study
Child Poverty in the U.S.

NADJA
Nadja was four and living in the Bronx when her mother was arrested because, at the request of a male friend, she unwittingly transported a bag that had drugs hidden it. Nadja’s mother was sent to an upstate NY prison, several hours away from New York City. Nadja went to live with an aunt, and her beloved older sister went to her grandmother’s home in another state (neither adult could afford to take both children). Nadja did not understand why she was separated from her mother and sister. Because her aunt had neither the transportation nor the time to make the round trip to the upstate prison, Nadja was not taken to see her mother. She felt lost and abandoned.

Nadja’s aunt tried to make her money stretch to cover enough food for her three children and Nadja, but sometimes the children had to have cereal for dinner. Her older cousins would sometimes take her food when they were hungry. Without health insurance, her aunt could not get Nadja proper medical care. Nadja became withdrawn and fearful. Given her situation, it becomes more understandable why children who have had a parent in prison are eight times more likely to go to jail themselves when they become adults.

Fortunately for Nadja, the Hour Children ministry, run by Sisters of St. Joseph in Queens, NY, was able to help her. Nadja moved into a group house run by the Sisters for children whose mothers are in prison; she was taken in the Hour Children van to visit her mother regularly for the “hour” of contact, and she attended the Hour Children nursery school, where she received individualized attention from the dedicated staff and the volunteers who work there. Through the intervention of this ministry, Nadja’s mother eventually qualified for a work release; she moved into an Hour Children home in Queens where her two children joined her. Nadja continued in the nursery school, and her sister received the speech therapy she needed. The girls were overjoyed to be reunited and to be with their mother. Challenges still lay before them, because without education, Nadja’s mother can only get a minimum-wage service job.

Discussion Questions
1. Although it was only Nadja’s mother who was supposed to be punished through her incarceration, how were Nadja and her younger sister “punished?”

2. How do you think this experience—being separated from their mother and their sibling without fully understanding why; not having enough to eat; not receiving proper medical care—will affect Nadja and her younger sister throughout their lives?

3. Imagine yourself or a child you know in this situation. How does this personal dimension affect your reaction to this story?

4. What structures and systems are in place which allow this to happen?

5. Who benefits from the structures and systems which allow child poverty to exist? What needs to be changed so that this problem can be solved?

6. Are there any steps that can be taken to ensure that Nadja and her sister have a brighter future? (For suggestions, see the Children’s Defense Fund Web site: http://www.childrensdefense.org.)
Case Study
A Mexican Family

THE ESPINOSA CHILDREN
The standard of living for the farmers in Chiapas, Mexico has been steadily declining in recent years. Growing coffee is the only way they can support their families, but with coffee prices falling, and powerful, wealthy countries dominating the trade market, it is farmers like Andrés Pérez Espinosa and his family who bear the burden.

“None of the children have shoes on their feet. We had good coffee prices before the devaluation of the peso in 1995, after that it was terrible,” says Andrés. “We only get six pesos a kilo (60 cents). We don’t have enough food for the children. They don’t get good food, they don’t have nice clothes. If I get only five or six pesos a kilo of coffee and children’s shoes cost 100 or 150 pesos ($10-15), then I can’t afford them.”

And while coffee prices continue to plummet, and the price of everything else continues to soar, it is no wonder why families like Andrés’ have a hard time making ends meet.

The coffee farmer attributes their hardships to the unjust system of trade that plagues not only Mexico, but countries all over the world. Andrés explains: “It is not an equal system. It is heavy work to cultivate coffee, all those long days in the field. It is unjust that we do not get more reward for all our long hard days of work.” He sighs. “If we got all the money that you pay for coffee in your country, then we could get shoes for all the children and a truck, and a nice house.”

Andrés calculates and then continues, “I produce between 230-680 pounds of coffee. That means 3000-9000 pesos ($300-$900). Recently my wife got sick and I had to pay 4000 pesos to the doctors—that was the whole coffee harvest gone in one or two days.”

Discussion Questions
Under current trade rules, small farmers are forced to compete with large international corporations. Because of this, families—like the Espinosa family—face poverty and hunger on a daily basis.

1. How does the current international trade system effect the Espinosa family? For example, what are some things that the Espinosa children lack?

2. How may hunger effect the physical and mental development of the children?

3. How may lack of affordable health care affect the development of the children?

4. In your opinion, is there any way for the Espinosa children to leave behind their life of poverty? What do you think needs to be changed in the international trading system for the children to have hopeful future?

To learn more about the coffee industry, see the Education for Justice unit on Workers’ Rights.

Adapted from Play Fair, Issue, 1 Autumn 2001, CAFOD.
http://www.cafod.org.uk
Case Study
Children of War

Discussion Questions
1. How has war concretely affected the lives of Laragh and Zlata?

2. How might their experience of war affect them psychologically?

3. What are some underlying needs of Laragh and Zlata that are not being met? (List as many as possible.)

4. How can those needs be met?

5. Who can (or should) be involved in meeting those needs?

6. Imagine yourself or a child you know in this situation. How does this personal dimension affect your reaction to this story?
Fact Sheet

GOSPEL VALUES AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

From the Gospels
At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child and had him stand among them. And He said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in My name welcomes Me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”
Matthew 18:1-6

Then little children were brought to Jesus for Him to place His hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”
Matthew 19:13-14

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he or she must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the one who sent Me.”
Mark 9:35-37

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.”
Luke 10:21

From Catholic Social Teaching
It must be stressed that the right, especially that of children and the young, to education and to morally correct conditions of life and communications media is once again being threatened in our days.

Special attention must be devoted to the children by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity and a great respect and generous concern for their rights. This is true of every child, but it becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more he or she is in need of everything, when she or he is sick, suffering or handicapped. By fostering and exercising a tender and strong concern for every child that comes into this world, the Church fulfills a fundamental mission: for She is called upon to reveal and put forward anew in history the example and the commandment of Christ the Lord, who placed the child at the heart of the kingdom of God: “Let the children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”
Pope John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio.

In the Christian view, our treatment of children becomes a measure of our fidelity to the Lord himself.
Pope John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio
Fact Sheet

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1989. It is built on the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1959. The Convention is the most comprehensive statement of children’s rights and it is backed up with the force of international law.

All Children have:

- The right to equality regardless of race, color, sex, religion or nationality.
- The right to a name and nationality.
- The right to develop physically and mentally in a healthy manner.
- The right to adequate housing, nutrition and medical services.
- The right to free primary school education.
- The right to rest and play.
- The right to special care and treatment if disabled.
- The right to be protected in times of war and conflict.
- The right to be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation.
- The right to be protected from work and anything that may interfere with education or be harmful to their health.
- The right of indigenous children to enjoy their own culture, religion and language.
- The right to express an opinion in matters affecting the child and to have that opinion heard.
- The right to love, understanding and protection.
- The right not be separated from parents unless for the child’s well-being and to be able to leave and enter any country to maintain contact with parents.
- The right to be among the first to receive aid and relief in times of disaster.

All young people under 18 years of age are covered by the Convention, unless their country allows them to vote at an earlier age.

To learn more about the Convention on the Rights of the child, go to http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm.

*Note: The United States and Somalia are the only two nations who have not ratified this convention. One reason for the U.S. decision to not ratify the treaty is that the treaty prohibits countries from using the death penalty against child criminals (those under the age of 18); this is a practice permitted in many American states. See the “Suggestions for Action” section for ideas on how to put pressure on the U.S. government to ratify this important treaty.
**Fact Sheet**

**FACT SHEET #1**

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**Child Poverty Worldwide**
An estimated 1.2 billion people worldwide survive on less than $1 per day. Half of them are children. *Refugees*, published by the Public Information Section of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

If the world were to invest an extra 30 cents out of every $100, all children would be healthy, well-nourished, and in primary school. UNICEF, *State of the World’s Children*, 2000.


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**Child Poverty in the United States**
11.6 million American children were poor in the year 2000—or one in six (16.2 percent).

Nearly one in three Black children (30.9 percent) and more than one in four Hispanic children (28.0 percent) are poor in America, compared to 13.0 percent of White children and 14.5 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander children.

In 2000, 9.2 million American children had no health coverage.


Overall, about 190,000 people under 18 are homeless each night in the United States. Above facts taken from National Coalition for the Homeless, http://www.nationalhomeless.org/who.html.
Fact Sheet

FACT SHEET #2

Education Worldwide
125 million children around the world are denied the chance to go to school. These numbers are the equivalent of every child in North America and every child in Europe being denied any schooling. Most of the children denied an education are girls. Free the Children, http://www.freethechildren.org/campaigns/ed_problem.html

Another 150 million children drop out of primary school before they have completed four years of education. Free the Children, http://www.freethechildren.org/campaigns/ed_problem.html

School buildings, like teachers and children, have become deliberate targets in war. During the Mozambique conflict in the 1980’s and 90’s, 45 percent of the schools were destroyed. Refugees, published by the Public Information Section of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Education in the United States
By the age of 18, young people in the United States have watched over 23,000 hours of television, many more than they have spent in the classroom. Index on Censorship, http://www.oneworld.org/index_oc/issue297/stats.htm


Fact Sheet

FACTSHEET #3

Child Health
Ten million children under the age of five die each year, the majority of them from preventable diseases and malnutrition.

About one third of children under five suffer malnutrition.

AIDS has killed more than 3.8 million children and orphaned another 13 million. In the worst affected countries, it is estimated that as many as half of today’s 15-year-olds will die from the disease.

By age 15, between 20-25 percent of British children have tried solvents or other drugs.

Twelve percent of 15-year-olds in the industrialized world smoke cigarettes every day.

In 2000, 9.2 million American children had no health coverage.

Child Labor
There are about 250 million child laborers worldwide.

Sixty-one percent of child laborers are in Asia, 32 percent are in Africa, and 7 percent are in Latin America.

Some 52 million toys are produced annually for export by China, Thailand, the Philippines, Bangladesh and India — most of them by child workers.
Children at Risk: Child Exploitation.

In the 1990s more than 250,000 American children, most younger than 15, worked illegally, according to an Associated Press series.

In 1999 in the United States, children as young as 8 were transported to unfamiliar neighborhoods, distant cities, and across state lines to peddle goods door-to-door and on street corners under hazardous conditions. These children were often sexually assaulted, and/or deserted.
Fact Sheet

FACT SHEET #4

Sexual Exploitation of Children

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is estimated to be a multi-billion dollar industry, drawing in over 1 million children each year worldwide.

The “sex tourism” industry, involving men travelling to other countries to engage in sex with children, has been documented in the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, and countries in North America and Eastern Europe.

Most of the children exploited in the sex trade are between the ages of 13 and 18, although there is evidence of children younger than 5 being sexually exploited as well.

Asia is the worst affected area for child prostitution, in which one million children are sexually exploited. There are an estimated 30,000 children in India in the sex trade, and between 80,000 and 800,000 in Thailand.

Approximately 30% of the 185,000 prostitutes in Vietnam are thought to be under the age of 16.

Approximately 25,400 children are engaged in prostitution in the Dominican Republic.

A recent survey indicated an estimated 5,000 children are involved in prostitution, pornography, and sex tourism in Mexico, most of whom are street children.

In Africa, sexual exploitation of children is on the rise in the whole continent. In South Africa, of the country’s 40 million people, 70,000 women and girls are believed to be working in the sex trade. Rapes of girl children have risen sharply in South Africa, based on the belief that sleeping with a virgin will cure AIDS.

In Africa, young boys and girls are often recruited into the armed forces not only to fight, but also to sexually service the soldiers.

A large portion of child prostitutes catch sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS), are forced to have abortions, and suffer serious psychological problems.

One study found that 60 to 70% of child prostitutes in Thailand are HIV infected.

Many circumstances such as poverty, lack of education, and parental pressure force children into the sex industry. Many families, however, mistakenly send their children into what they believe to be domestic servitude, where the children are then kidnapped, trafficked across borders, and forced to work as sex slaves.

In the United States an estimated 125,000 to 200,000 adolescents (both female and male) become involved in prostitution each year, about two-thirds of whom are street youth.


Eighty-five percent of U.S. child prostitutes have previously suffered rape, incest or abuse

Violence
Between 85 and 115 million girls and women have undergone some form of female genital mutilation. The United Nation’s Human Development Report, 2000.

Children are tortured by the authorities in 11 countries.

In the United States, juveniles make up 12 percent of all crime victims reported to the police, including 71 percent of all sex crimes and 38 percent of all kidnapping victims.

There were an estimated 903,000 victims of child maltreatment in 1998 in America. The highest victimization rates were for infants and toddlers age three and younger.

Firearms killed 3,761 American children and teens age 19 and under in 1998—that’s 10 children every day.


Between 1979 and 1998, gunfire killed nearly 84,000 children and teens in America—36,000 more than the total number of American soldiers killed in battle in Vietnam.

Juvenile Justice
In 1999, and estimated of 2.5 million arrests were made of people under 18.

Between 1994 and 1999, the juvenile arrest rate for the Violent Crime Index offenses fell 36%.

Despite declines in crime and violence, children are increasingly being tried as adults and held in juvenile jails and prisons.

Minority youths are over-represented at every level of the system. In 1997, although they represented just 34 percent of the U.S. adolescent population, minority youths represented about 60% of those in the juvenile justice system.

Black youths are more than twice as likely as White youths to be held in a detention facility for similar offenses.

Only six countries in the world—Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Yemen—were known to have executed juvenile offenders in the 1990s.

The United States executed nine juvenile offenders in the 1990s, more than the reported total for any other nation in the world.
Fact Sheet

FACT SHEET #6

**Conflict and War**
It is estimated that more than two million children were killed in conflict in the last decade. Another six million are believed to have been wounded and one million orphaned. *Refugees*, published by the Public Information Section of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Between 1985 and 1995, over 2 million children have been the victims of war; between 4 and 5 million have been disabled; 12 million left homeless; and over 10 million have been psychologically traumatized.


Six million children were injured in armed conflicts in the last decade.


Children in 87 countries live among 60 million land mines. As many as 10,000 per year continue to become victims of mines.

*Refugees*, published by the Public Information Section of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

**Children Refugees**
There are approximately 25 million uprooted children in the world—children whose parents are refugees seeking safety in another country or are displaced within their own country.

At any one time there may be up to 100,000 children refugees separated from their parents in Western Europe alone. As many as 20,000 separated children lodge asylum applications every year in Europe, North America, and Oceania.

Above facts taken from *Refugees*, published by the Public Information Section of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

**Child Soldiers**
In the last decade there have been about 300,000 child soldiers.


There are an estimated 120,000 child soldiers in Africa, accounting for about half the total around the world.


In Uganda, children make up 90% of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), an armed opposition group, mostly between the ages of 13 and 16.


Most child soldiers are between the ages of 15 and 18, but many are recruited from the age of 10 and up.


Girls are also forced into armed combat, facing the added trauma of sexual slavery. Nearly 100% of girl soldiers who escaped the LRA in Uganda had sexually transmitted diseases.


Technological advances in weaponry have contributed to the increased use of child soldiers. Lightweight automatic weapons are simple to operate, and can be used by children as young as 10.


Children have been forced to commit atrocities against their own families and neighbors, ensuring that they are stigmatized and unable to return home, so they will stay with the armies.

Case Study

HOMELESS CHILDREN IN THE U.S.

To Be Young and Homeless


Like most people who find themselves seeking shelter at the Emergency Assistance Unit (E.A.U.) in the Bronx, the sole portal into New York City’s shelter system for homeless families, Jackie Fuller and two of her children were at the tail end of a run of extremely bad luck.

Fuller and her three youngest moved in with Fuller’s two grown daughters and granddaughter in the East New York section of Brooklyn — seven of them sharing a small two-bedroom apartment — while Fuller frantically looked for work. She began interviewing on Wall Street, where she’d received and delivered government bonds for 17 years before leaving the city, but no offers came. While she waited, she tried peddling bath towels at a flea market and audited a course in Web design. After Sept. 11, the interviews virtually ceased. Meanwhile, the landlord of the Brooklyn apartment objected to the overcrowding and set a deadline of Jan. 1 for the newcomers to move out.

On Jan. 14, Fuller and her two youngest children, Shanna, 16, and Darian, 12, set out for the Bronx, hauling their three suitcases to the Emergency Assistance Unit, or E.A.U., as it is commonly known. “We thought there wouldn’t be any kids,” Shanna told me later, referring to the E.A.U., “but there were a whole lot!”

A sturdy, ebullient teenager with a penchant for pink accessories, Shanna had gotten the lowdown on the shelter system from her best friend, whose family was homeless a couple of years ago. Her younger brother, Darian, had been “acting” for weeks so that no one in his seventh-grade class, where he’s known as a jokester, would ever suspect he’d become homeless.

Reporters aren’t allowed inside the E.A.U. or even near its doors, but I did manage a brief visit inside the one-story brick building early this past winter. A series of windowless rooms, it has the bright, 24-hour feel of a casino. The place is crammed with children . . . every member of each family must be present in order for that family’s case to move forward. There is a low din of crying and coughing, but I found the atmosphere weirdly hushed.

“It’s small, but it’s neat,” Fuller told me, sitting at a small kitchen table five days into her stay at the temporary housing the E.A.U. provided. She’s soft-spoken but an easy talker. Her children adore her. As we sat, Darian absentmindedly fingered his mother’s gold earring and ran his hand through her hair. He’s an ungainly youth, sweet-tempered, but he was grumpy about his new circumstances . . . He missed being able to walk outside and play basketball. Darian paced and moped in the tiny space, peering out the window and occasionally repairing to the narrow fifth-floor hallway, where he practiced boxing moves. As for Shanna, she was determined not to let homelessness impinge on her life as an extremely popular high-school junior. She woke up at 5 a.m. and left the apartment at 6, taking three subway trains followed by a bus ride — a two-hour odyssey to her school.

Fuller and her kids were joining a skyrocketing population of homeless families in New York City. An average of nearly 32,000 people slept in shelters each night last month, up by 23 percent from a year ago — the largest one-year increase in the city’s shelter history. Today, families make up 75 percent of New York’s homeless-shelter population, with more than 13,000 children having slept in city shelters and temporary apartments most nights this winter.

The root causes of what is called chronic homelessness — the adults drifting perpetually among shelters and haunting the nation’s downtowns — are held to be mental illness and substance abuse, but the chronic homeless constitute only 10 percent of the total shelter population, and children, obviously, don’t fall within their ranks. A typical homeless child is under 5 years old, very poor and living with a sibling and a single mother. The mother may well lack the education or job skills to lift her out of poverty; often, she has been the victim of domestic violence. Compounding such children’s precarious circumstances are two long-term economic trends: stagnant or falling wages coupled with a rise in housing prices.

In an era regarded as generally prosperous, the numbers are staggering: between 900,000 and 1.4 million children in America are homeless for a time in a given year.
Case Study (continued)

Children in and around the E.A.U. are accustomed to the uncomfortable spectacle of their parents as supplicants, powerless and dependent. They’ve seen their mothers cry and lose their tempers with city employees, only to be punished for it. The illusion that a parent can protect them — shelter them, literally, from the world’s indifference — is broken swiftly and severely. You see the result in the teenagers; angry, full of shame, but afraid to vent their anger on their beleaguered parents. Many look on the verge of implosion, especially the boys, who skulk outside the E.A.U., taking big, hard breaths of cold air.

While there is diversity among homeless families and the chains of events that lead them to seek public shelter, there is also a shared context: in 1970, there were approximately 300,000 more of what are called extremely-low-income housing units in America than families who needed them; now there are 4.5 million more extremely-low-income families in need of housing than there are units in their range of affordability.

As for welfare housing allowances, they are pitiful. A family of three in New York can receive a maximum of $286 a month for shelter allowance — try renting an apartment for that. And during the 1990’s, the city’s once-robust investments in building and developing low-income housing were slashed by about 50 percent. Poor people struggling to pay the rent will struggle much harder to find new housing, should they lose what they have. And when they can’t, they drop with their children into the homeless system.

Supporting a homeless family in New York costs city taxpayers $36,000 a year — an amount that could subsidize at least four families’ yearly rents or finance countless much cheaper preventive measures: emergency grants to pay back rent or help families to secure new apartments; legal aid to help fight evictions.

Still, fiscal responsibility alone is not likely to serve as a rallying cry. Make no mistake: ending homelessness for families with children would cost money. The question is how much responsibility we, as a society, feel for the children of people whose poverty, or pathologies, have resulted in those children’s having nowhere to live. A shift toward spending money to end children’s homelessness rather than simply trying to manage it will come only if enough people decide that the social costs of having a million American children homeless each year are too high to tolerate. It will require a consensus that the suffering and damage inflicted on these children through illness and lapsed education and trauma that could very well compromise their productivity as adults not only reflects badly on all of us, but is actually bad for us — that we, as a society, are worse off because of it.

After hearing nothing from the city for a month, Jackie Fuller went to the nonprofit group Coalition for the Homeless, which contacted the Department of Homeless Services and learned that she’d been eligible for 10 days, but no one had told her. Fuller went limp. She phoned Shanna, who shrieked into her ear. Only Darian’s reaction was muted. “I already knew,” he insisted.

His equanimity crumbled at the news that the family would have to move yet again — into Tier II housing — and then again, at some more distant point, when permanent housing became available. “We have to move?” he moaned, “Oh, Ma.”

Discussion Questions
1. What unjust systems led to the Fuller family’s homelessness?

2. How does being homeless affect Ms. Fuller’s children? How would it affect other children? What do homeless children have to deal with? How are their rights violated?

3. What aspects of the E.A.U. seem counterproductive? What aspects are encouraging?

4. How could the E.A.U. be reformed to both better serve the families and be more fiscally responsible?

5. Consider Egan’s point on the final page of this article. She says that fiscal responsibility alone is not enough to ensure that a just system of housing is set up. What is required is a shift in values and priorities among taxpayers. How does this relate to a “conversion of the heart?”

6. Catholic Social Teaching says that the poorest and most vulnerable, such as the Fuller family, should be at the center of our concerns. How can we reform our hearts and our society, including institutions like the E.A.U., to reflect this option for the poor?
Dedicated to the children and adolescents of the world, and guided by the standards of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the UN Special Session on Children accomplished the following:

- Reviewed the progress made for children since the 1990 World Summit for Children, when the UN first set concrete goals to improve the lives of the world’s children
- Set new goals to be accomplished by the year 2015

The Special Session Outcome Document (to read this document go to http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/) began with a “Declaration” which, among other topics, stressed a commitment to children, reaffirmed obligations, and listed important guiding principles (see box below). The document continued with a “Review of Progress and Lessons Learned”, a “Plan of Action” which includes quantitative outcome goals for the year 2015, a section on “Mobilizing Resources” that will be used to reach targets, and “Follow-up Actions and Assessments” on regional, national and global levels.

What: UN Special Session on Children
Who: The UN General Assembly, more than 70 government leaders and Heads of State, 3000 members of NGOs, children’s advocates and 240 child delegates
Where: New York City
When: May 8 – 10, 2002

1. Put children first. In all actions related to children, the best interests of the child shall be a primacy consideration.


3. Leave no child behind. Each girl and boy is born free and equal in dignity and rights; therefore, all forms of discrimination affecting children must end.

4. Care for every child. Children must get the best possible start in life. Their survival, protection, growth and development in good health and with proper nutrition is the essential foundation of human development.

5. Educate every child. All girls and boys must have access to and complete primary education that is free, compulsory and of good quality as a cornerstone of an inclusive basic education.

6. Protect children from harm and exploitation. Children must be protected against any acts of violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination, as well as all forms of terrorism and hostage-taking.

7. Protect children from war. Children must be protected from the horrors of armed conflict.


9. Listen to children and ensure their participation. Children and adolescents are resourceful citizens capable of helping to build a better future for all.

10. Protect the Earth for children.

(From text of the United Nations Special Session on Children Outcome Document, Section I)
Suggestions for Action

1. The U.S. and Somalia are the only nations in the world that have refused to ratify the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**. Ratification of this document is necessary to begin the process of ensuring children’s rights. Encourage students to write to the President and members of Congress in order to urge them to ratify the convention. See [http://www.aiusa.org/children/crn_sampleprint.html](http://www.aiusa.org/children/crn_sampleprint.html) for a sample letter to send to your Senator.

2. Choose one specific issue related to children and do some in-depth research about it. Find out more about the problem and what people are doing in response to it. Share this information with your family, classmates, and/or parish members. Pray and spend time in reflection alone and with others to discern what more you can do to become more involved in the work for children’s rights.

3. Join the crusade to protect children from sexual exploitation. **ECPAT-USA** is part of a global network working to eradicate child pornography, child prostitution, and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes. This organization and others like it seek to increase awareness about the sexual exploitation of children; develop strategies to prevent the participation of U.S. tourists, military personnel and businessmen in exploitation; and promote the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Visit [http://207.153.255.161/ecpat1/index2.htm](http://207.153.255.161/ecpat1/index2.htm) for more information, or write to ECPAT-USA at 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115; Tel (212) 870-2427.

4. Support ministries like **Hour Children** who work with the children of imprisoned and newly released women. Contact Sr. Maureen at 36-11 A 12th Street, Long Island City, NY 11106, (718) 433-4724 for more information.
Further Resources

Amnesty International’s Children’s Rights Network
http://www.aiusa.org/children
This Web site provides up-to-date articles and campaign efforts to ensure the rights of children worldwide.

Children’s Defense Fund
http://www.childrensdefense.org/
The Children’s Defense Fund has offices nationwide which provide services for needy children. Their headquarters in Washington advocates for policies which protect the rights of children. Check out their Web site to find out more about their ongoing campaigns.

UNICEF
http://www.unicef.org
UNICEF stands for “United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund.” Their Web site provides information on actions taken by the United Nations to protect children, includes a special section called “Voices of Youth,” and provides educational materials on child labor, child soldiers, and other issues.

Human Rights Watch
http://hrw.org/children

Free the Children
http://www.freethechildren.org
Child activist Craig Kielburger founded this network to advocate for children’s rights. The Web site includes activities, case studies, and campaign ideas, as well as information about Oprah’s Angel Network.

The Global Movement for Children
This Web site provides an extensive network of agencies advocating for children’s rights, as well as an “action matrix” to help activists.

We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many things can wait, the children cannot. Right now is the time their bones are being formed, their senses are being developed. To them we cannot answer “tomorrow,” their name is “today.”

Gabriela Mistral, Noble Prize Poet from Chile