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## Gravy train doesn't stop here anymore

The frontier between middle-class life and poverty is ill-defined. One day things are going swimmingly; the next day a family can find itself literally in the poor house.



By **THOMAS WALKOM** National Affairs Columnist

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The frontier between middle-class life and poverty is ill-defined. One day things are going swimmingly; the next day a family can find itself literally in the poor house.

That's the theme of a new documentary film on real life in the Toronto area by Laura Sky and Cathy Crowe. Sky is a veteran filmmaker with a taste for justice. Crowe is a street nurse who works with the homeless.

Their film, *Home Safe Toronto*, is the second in a four-part series on homelessness around the country. But more than that, it's a look at how easy it is to fall – particularly in a world where work is becoming increasingly insecure.

The families Sky and Crowe focus on are remarkably unremarkable. Scott Taylor works in a Newmarket auto parts plant. Phil Richards is a unionized Brampton autoworker. Debbie Frampton

works for an agency that cleans homes.

And then something happens that turns their lives upside down. For the Taylors, Scott's wage – at just over \$12 an hour – just isn't enough. The family can't make its rent, is evicted and ends up in a homeless shelter.

For Frampton, it is the death of her mother with whom she and her daughter have been living. They, too, end up in a shelter.

For Richards, it is the auto meltdown. He and his family had already moved from Windsor after he was laid off there. Now, in Brampton, he is laid off again. He has received one eviction notice and awaits another. His wife, Colleen, works up to 70 hours a week in a doughnut shop trying to keep the family above the waterline.

The overwhelming reaction of almost all those interviewed by the filmmakers is a combination of bewilderment and shame. "It's just embarrassing," Taylor says.

Two of his young sons wonder if perhaps the family's misfortunes are their fault. "People spend money on their kids before they pay the rent," says one. Another lands a part-time job at a fast food outlet to help pay for groceries.

Meanwhile, their father reminisces about the good old days when he and his wife, Joelle, both had jobs. "We thought it was the gravy train," he says.

The Ontario the filmmakers explore is not Dickensian London. The Taylors spend only five weeks in the York Region homeless shelter before they find an apartment. For Frampton and her daughter, the shelter stay is only three weeks. But that is the point. The film is not about an alien underclass. It is about average people living on the edge who are just one paycheque away from the shelter.

Indeed, the Taylors found themselves back in York Region's shelter after the film was completed.

Structurally, there's a delicately didactic sense to the film as it moves from the initial sense of helplessness experienced by the interviewees to descriptions of those attempting some kind of social action.

Throughout, Sky weaves these contemporary stories with that of her grandmother, a seamstress who helped to organize a union in the sweat shops of the 1930s needle trade.

*Home Safe Toronto* is to be shown free at the Revue Cinema, 400 Roncesvalles, at 7 p.m. on Oct. 15. It's also available to any group that wants it (416-536-6581). Sky says she hopes that it will appeal to more than those she calls the usual suspects. In particular, she hopes it will have some impact on business people who, for reasons of cost, profit and the inexorable demands of shareholders, find it convenient to squeeze wages and contract out work.

"If we continue to allow the revolving door of jobs, this is how it ends up," she says, not inaccurately.

*Thomas Walkom's column appears Wednesday and Saturday.*

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