

# Snapshots of a brutal society—one week in America

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## Fairfield, Connecticut—Ecuadoran family run down on railroad tracks

Julia Toledo and her sons Carlos, 12; Jose, 10; and Pedro, 3 were hit and killed by an Amtrak train moving at 71 miles per hour as they walked on the tracks around 2:20 a.m. on Tuesday. Julia's six-year-old son Angel was brought unconscious to Bridgeport Hospital, his left leg severed and his head seriously injured. He was declared brain dead Thursday.

The five family members arrived in the US from Ecuador one and a half years ago, the children's father remaining behind. They had lived in nearby Bridgeport, near Julia's sister and brother. Julia had been working as a janitor at Fairfield University. Last week they moved into the YMCA Families in Transition shelter. It is unclear why the family was walking the tracks in the early morning hours, but the mother had reportedly told a case worker at the shelter that the stress of working and raising her sons had become too much for her. She had quit her job and needed housing.

The accident took place as the five crossed a trestle over a two-lane street. Angel had crossed to the right side of the tracks, and as Julia crossed the tracks to reach him, the other children followed her, and they were hit by the train. Traveling at such a speed, it would take more than a mile for the engineer to stop the train. Kenneth Gambardella of the Connecticut Department of Transportation also commented, "Sometimes you can't hear these trains at all until they're right on top of you, and by then, of course, it's too late." According to the Federal Railroad Administration's own figures, 80 percent of public railroad crossings have no lights or gates. In 1998 there were 979 fatalities at rail crossings, with 514 of these the result of people walking onto tracks.

A trauma surgeon at Bridgeport Hospital described the accident scene: the front of the train spattered with blood, a small gym shoe and Sesame Street figurines lying among the mangled bodies.

## Missouri and Kentucky—two executions

Edward Lee Harper, Jr. was put to death at the Kentucky

State Penitentiary in Eddyville on Tuesday. He was the first person to die by lethal injection in the state of Kentucky, having chosen that method over the electric chair. Harper was convicted of the 1982 shooting death of his adoptive parents.

Jesse Lee Wise was executed by the state of Missouri at 1 a.m. Wednesday at the Potosi Correctional Center. Wise was convicted of killing a 49-year-old woman in August 1988. He had approached the woman, asking her for \$30 in advance to wash and wax her car. When she refused, he followed her into her home and struck in the head with a pipe wrench. He stole the woman's money jewelry and credit cards, for funds to support a cocaine habit.

Wise was the sixth prisoner to be put to death this year in Missouri, and the thirty-eighth since the state resumed executions in 1989. Since the resumption of capital punishment in the United States, only the states of Texas, Virginia and Florida have executed more death row inmates than Missouri. Forty-six death row inmates have been executed this year in the US, and the total number of state killings now stands at 546 overall since the death penalty was reinstated in January 1977.

## Los Angeles—police shooting victim was paranoid schizophrenic

The identity of the homeless woman shot to death May 21 by LAPD officers investigating whether her shopping cart was stolen has been made public. She was Margaret Laverne Mitchell, a 5-foot 1-inch, 102-pound woman, age 54, who suffered from severe mental illness.

On Monday, Mitchell's son, Richard Mitchell of Long Beach, released information on his late mother's background. She was a college graduate who worked for several years as a bank employee, raising her son alone after the death of her husband. By all accounts, she was a pleasant, active woman until about five years ago, when she began showing symptoms of serious mental illness, such as hearing voices in her head.

Over the last several years Margaret Mitchell occasionally lived with her son and other relatives, and also stayed at

church shelters. But she would return to life on the streets because she was paranoid of those around her. People who knew her on the streets reported that she was kind, but spoke very few words and zealously protected her shopping cart and the meager belongings she kept in it.

Richard Mitchell described his mother's symptoms to doctors and was told she was probably a paranoid schizophrenic who could have benefited significantly from medication. He had requested that the LA and Pasadena police have his mother committed, but was told that unless she hurt herself or someone else, they could not intercede. California once had a comprehensive public mental health system, but it was dismantled during the governorship of Ronald Reagan.

Protests against police brutality are occurring in Southern California almost every day. Last Sunday, protestors denounced the shooting of Mitchell. On Monday more than a thousand people descended on City Hall in Riverside to protest the continued refusal by authorities to take any action against the four officers who killed 19-year-old Tyisha Miller last December. On Tuesday over a hundred held a noon protest against Riverside police violence in front of the Los Angeles Federal Courthouse. Inside, closing arguments were being made to the jury in the case brought by the family of Derek Hayward, a 30-year-old father of three, strangled and suffocated by Riverside officers who were supposed to be taking him into custody for his own protection.

#### **Orlando, Florida—woman taken off life support, mother will not face murder charges**

Prosecutors have decided against charging Shirley Egan, 68, with murder following the decision of her daughter to be taken off life support. However, Egan has been charged with attempted murder in the shooting of her 42-year-old daughter, Georgette Smith. The mother is accused of shooting her daughter in March after overhearing a discussion about putting her in a nursing home. The bullet that hit Smith in the neck severed her spinal cord, making it difficult for her to speak, and leaving her incontinent and incapable of swallowing.

Ms. Egan had supported her daughter's request to have life support removed, but her attorney feared this could lead to a murder charge, a charge which her daughter reportedly did not support. Florida State Attorney Lawson Lamar cited Egan's poor health and closeness with her daughter in his decision not to bring murder charges. Shirley Egan remains in jail, with a trial date set for August 9. She maintains that she did not mean to shoot her daughter.

#### **Kansas City, Missouri—professional wrestler plunges to death during televised stunt**

Professional wrestler Owen Hart fell to his death last

Sunday at Kemper Arena in Kansas City as he was lowered to the ring during a stunt in front of 16,200 fans. Hart—who was known as the "Blue Blazer"—was a member of a prominent Canadian wrestling family, and performed with the World Wrestling Federation.

Hart had been attached to wires near the top of the arena. According to WWF President Vince McMahon, the plan was for him to descend into the ring in "superhero-type fashion" during the televised cable broadcast. According to Hart's brother Bret, "There was a bit of discomfort about the danger in it. But somehow over the weekend he got talked into doing it again. He was very uneasy about it." He added, "My brother Owen was never a stuntman."

WWF and the rival World Champion Wrestling, owned by media mogul Ted Turner, make millions promoting their shows. In a scramble for ratings the shows have employed continually more bizarre tactics, including presenting porn stars ringside and involving the wrestlers in evermore violent matches. These have included scripted battles where the men slug each other with road signs or metal pots, or throw each other through windshields in the parking lot.

Bret Hart's sister Ellie Hart lashed out against the wrestling organizations. "Frankly, wrestling was getting so far out and my poor brother Owen was a sacrifice for the ratings, that's how I look at it," she said. "They kept on getting more and more far out with the gimmicks and angles.... We figured sooner or later somebody was going to end up with a tragedy."

#### **Fairfax, Virginia—police use suburban neighborhood as shooting range**

District of Columbia weapons instructor Henry Rorie took about a dozen police officers on Monday to a firing range on the grounds of the Lorton Correctional Complex, after he discovered their scheduled range was already in use. The officers then proceeded to fire submachine guns on the range meant for shotguns. Up to 15 of their 9 mm bullets shot into a nearby residential area, hitting houses and cars.

Resident Lori Hatton said that one bullet crashed through her dining room window, narrowly missing her husband who was holding one of their eight-month-old twin girls. "It could have killed somebody. I just feel unsafe in my own house," she said.

DC Executive Assistant Police Chief Terrance Gainer said that Rorie used "poor judgment," and the officers "violated even the minimum safety standards."



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