

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Thousands line up for free dental care in Georgia

Thousands of Georgians waited in line to see volunteer dentist teams at the First Baptist Church of Woodstock August 12 and 13. Many arrived on Thursday night and slept on the sidewalk.

“I have a couple of missing teeth and I need some extractions,” one woman told the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. She explained that she had lost her job a couple of years ago and had gone without dental insurance since then. A University of Georgia student who had recently spent \$3,800 on dental care explained, “I never got it finished—I couldn’t afford the rest of it—so I came to see if I could get the rest of it done.”

“The line went around the building, all the way through the parking lot and around a warehouse,” Atlanta dentist Richard Smith told the *Journal Constitution*. Smith estimated that at one point, 4,000 were in line. Over 1,600 volunteers, including 300 dentists, contributed to the effort.

“A bunch of us started looking around and realized that with this economy we had to do something,” Smith said. “We are not responsible for the problem that’s there, but we’re the only ones who can fix it.”

“A lot of these people are in pain, they have infections, they’re missing front teeth ... there’s a huge need just to get people back to work. Mothers can’t take care of their children, father’s can’t earn a living,” he said.

Police stopped allowing new arrivals by Friday because the mass turnout risked overwhelming the event. A similar clinic held in South Carolina the week before was forced to turn away at least 1,000 people, provoking frustration and anger in the crowd.

Poll finds widespread depression in Appalachia

A survey of 188 metropolitan areas across the US by the Gallup polling organization found the highest rates of clinical depression in Appalachia. Of the 11 areas where residents are most likely to report they have been diagnosed with depression, six are in Appalachia. Huntington, West Virginia recorded the highest rates, with one in three residents saying they had been diagnosed with the disorder.

Gallup notes, “Respondents who have been diagnosed with depression report a high number of days in the past month when poor health kept them from doing their usual activities. Depression

is more strongly related to unhealthy days than any other specific health condition asked about, including high blood pressure, diabetes, and asthma.” Those metro areas that ranked highest for depression are among those with the highest average number of “unhealthy days.”

The region has high unemployment, low labor force participation, deep poverty, and little social infrastructure to aid those struggling with psychological problems or other health issues. In Huntington, West Virginia, 45 percent of all adults are obese. A 2008 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey of the area found more than one in five over the age of 45 years old suffered from coronary heart disease, and one in six had been diagnosed with diabetes. The CDC found that 48.1 percent of residents over the age of 65 were missing all of their natural teeth.

Economy forces delay in college, family plans

Of Americans aged 18 to 29, three-quarters expect to delay a major life change or purchase—including raising a family and buying a home—because of economic problems, a new survey by the non-profit Generation Opportunity indicates. The finding echoes an earlier Gallup poll that showed that less than half of Americans believe the current generation of youth will have a better life than the last one.

Nationally, the unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds stands at 17.4 percent. In many regions youth unemployment is higher than 30 percent.

“I don’t want to invest in something I can’t afford, given the economy breaking down,” 20-year-old UC San Diego student Alicia Thomas told the *Los Angeles Times*. “I’ll be taking smaller steps.... You can’t reach for the stars at this point.”

“Our generation is going to take the brunt of the force of the debt crisis,” 21-year-old John Glass, a government major at New York’s St. Lawrence University, told the *Times*. “It’s going to mean fewer jobs, higher interest rates, more debt. We’ll have to sacrifice. This is a raw deal for our generation.”

Army soldier commits suicide after 8 deployments

After receiving orders for his ninth deployment to Iraq and

Afghanistan, Staff Sergeant Jared Hagemann went onto the grounds of the training camp at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in late July and shot himself in the head. Spokesmen for the base continue to tell the local press that the cause of Hagemann's death remains undetermined, but the soldier's widow said he had been deeply disturbed by his experiences and actions in combat.

"It was horrible. And he would just cry," Ashley Hagemann told local KOMO News August 12. "And [he felt] there's no way that any God would forgive him—that he was going to hell. He couldn't live with that any more." She said her husband had wanted out of the military. "He just wanted to know what it felt like to be normal again."

Hagemann's death is indicative of the mental health crisis among the veteran population. Left psychologically scarred from witnessing or carrying out violence, soldiers are under pressure to hide their problems.

Suicides have reached epidemic proportions among military personnel involved in the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations. Soldiers also have higher rates of substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and other indicators of mental instability.

The Army has attempted to deal with the growing unpopularity of the wars and poor recruitment levels with endless redeployments of battle-worn soldiers. Joint Base Lewis-McChord has fed some of the most brutal campaigns in southern Afghanistan, including the 2009 "surge" authorized by the Obama administration, during which soldiers from the base committed numerous atrocities against Afghan civilians.

Two mentally disabled men die after transfer to group homes

A 54-year-old mentally disabled man died of a blood clot just four days after he was transferred from the Massachusetts-run Templeton Developmental Center into a group home run by Northeast Residential Services. He was described as being in excellent health at Templeton. The man's family has expressed concern that his death was caused by a medication error.

The man's death follows a case of another man who died of aspiration pneumonia from a plastic bag shortly after being transferred from Fernald Developmental Center to a group home. The man suffered from pica, a desire to swallow nonfood items.

The state is planning to close five of its six mental health institutions by 2013, shifting hundreds of developmentally disabled patients into group homes that have far lower levels of staffing and supervision.

Massachusetts HIV and AIDS services to be cut

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health notified community health agencies on August 12 that the state's AIDS prevention budget would be reduced by \$4.3 million. The cut,

amounting to one quarter of the department's yearly spending on the program, will impact public health worker training, high school sex education, public awareness campaigns, access to contraceptives for teens and college students, and needle exchanges for the drug addicted—practices that helped to reduce infection rates by more than 50 percent over the past decade at a time when most other states saw rising infection rates.

The budget cut is a reaction to federal changes for AIDS prevention, including a halving of federal funding effective immediately. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is diverting funding from Massachusetts and other states with lower rates of infection away to states with rising rates. The CDC can now also dictate how states spend federal funding, a change that will impact community-based health programs in particular. Prevention program funding will be instead put into case management of those already infected.

The AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts is among the organizations to be affected. The committee's president, Rebecca Haag, told the *Boston Globe* that it would have to shut down its 25-year-old hotline service. "We are the sole HIV hot line for the state," she said. "And we actually picked up coverage for Rhode Island when the government chose not to fund its hot line. We can no longer fund two statewide hot lines without any support."

New Jersey homeless camp forced to take down wooden huts

A Lakewood, New Jersey homeless camp called Tent City has been told to dismantle wooden huts the residents built to stay warm last winter. Frail and elderly homeless occupants will have to instead live in fabric tents that have been stressed by heavy rains. "It's a little like a friend has died," 60-year-old Marilyn Berenzweig told the *New Jersey News* as her hut was torn down August 15. "It was small, but it was cozy."

The encampment grew over the past few years in the woods on the outskirts of town and is now home to 65 people. The nearest homeless shelters are 35 miles away, in Trenton.

Similar camps have sprung up all over the country. The homeless population is vulnerable to frostbite, hypothermia, and freezing deaths, as well as dangerous wood or propane fires. In 2009, one Lakewood Tent City resident was killed and another was seriously injured in two separate propane stove accidents. Last year the encampment was buried in three feet of snow.



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