

# Notes on the social crisis in America

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## New Orleans' poor struggle six years after Katrina

Six years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Louisiana, the city proper is home to 110,000 fewer people. Tens of thousands of others in the wider Gulf Coast were unable to return to their homes.

Those with the fewest resources before the storm were among those permanently displaced. Low-income, predominately minority women were especially hard hit. The greater New Orleans metropolitan area is home to 65,423 fewer black women and girls than in 2005, data from the Institute for Women's Policy Research indicates. Overall, the number of women and girls decreased by 108,116.

In the aftermath of the storm, some 4,000 public housing apartments were bulldozed. Of public housing tenants, fewer than ten percent—238 families—have been able to move into renovated apartments, and only half of the 3,000 families living in the projects have returned to the city at all.

According to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, 47,738 homes still stand vacant in the city. At the same time, the homeless population is 70 percent higher than before Katrina. The American media simply ignores the ongoing disaster in New Orleans.

## Alabama jail severely overcrowded

Overcrowding and understaffing in Birmingham's Jefferson County jail are at crisis proportions. Inmates are crowded four or five to a cell, and are rarely given clean bedding. The *Birmingham News* reported August 29 that the jail issues inmates only one clean uniform per week, and prisoners are compelled to rinse out their underwear in the cell block toilets.

There are 19 deputies charged with guarding over 1,200 inmates. "The conditions right now I thought I'd never see," a 28-year employee of the jail told the paper. Over 200 inmates had nowhere to sleep but the floor. Thirty or more inmates share one toilet and one shower.

The conditions are unsafe, inhumane, and in violation of basic democratic rights. In June, the jail suspended visitation, religious services, as well as access to the exercise area and the law library. Prisoners are kept in lockdown as much as 22 hours of every day.

Prisoners include some who are eligible for release, but have not had their papers processed because of low staffing. "I know it's jail, but it's extra bad," one prisoner who was two days overdue for release told the *Birmingham News*. "The conditions are horrible."

"We haven't seen our families since June or July," another inmate

said.

The county government is demanding that all departments, including the jail system, reduce budgets by another 20 percent.

## Free legal aid programs crippled by budget cuts

Legal aid programs serving the poor have been forced to slash staffing and services after severe budget cuts. Legal aid offices have long been forced to operate on thin budgets with heavily overloaded and poorly paid staff.

Legal aid programs provide representation to the poor in many cases involving medical bills, foreclosure, child custody, domestic violence and other difficult situations.

Earlier this year, Congress reduced funding by 4 percent, \$15.8 million, for the Legal Services Corp. (LSC), a non-profit organization that distributes grants to 136 state-level programs. For 2012, the House Appropriations Committee has proposed cutting another \$104 million. These cuts would leave total federal funding for legal aid at a paltry \$300 million. This is the same level of funding the programs received in 1999 (a 25 percent cut taking inflation into account).

Since 2007, the number of people eligible for legal aid has risen by 27 percent, LSC President James Sandman told *USA Today* August 29.

"The funding cuts are having a significant impact on the services we can offer to the nearly two million New Jersey residents in or on the brink of poverty," Legal Services of New Jersey President Melville Miller told the paper. Nationally, some 64 million people qualify for legal aid.

## Minnesota father charged with abandoning son after losing job and home

A Lakeville, Minnesota father was arrested in California Tuesday, charged with a gross misdemeanor of child neglect after abandoning his 11-year-old son.

Steven Alexander Cross, a 60-year-old architect and single father, was described as deeply depressed, desperate for work, and plagued by delinquent bills related to previous work contracts. "He just seemed like someone who had lost everything in this economy and was down on his luck," a deli owner who had recently hired him told the Associated Press.

Police said that on July 18 Cross wrote a letter as his son slept, and left. The letter instructed the boy to ride his bike to the neighbor's house with his video games and deliver another letter to her, which asked her to care for him. Neighbors said the child arrived in tears.

"If this paper is wet it's because I am crying so bad," Cross wrote to his son. "You know your dad loves you more than anything. ... There are many many great years ahead of you. Not so for me."

The letter described the collapse in the jobs market, and explained that sheriff's officials were seizing the house.

In an email to an ex-girlfriend, Cross wrote, "I probably only have a couple of days. ... No one I called would help me. ... I didn't know what to do. I am scared and hopelessly depressed." He was living in a van at the time of his arrest.

### **Colorado rolls back Medicaid expansion**

Colorado is drastically scaling back Medicaid coverage for adults without children. Two years ago, the state introduced an expansion that created an eligibility class for childless adults who earned less than \$10,900, the poverty line in 2009.

The program was to be funded by a fee imposed on hospitals that had been projected to generate some \$1.2 billion. However, because Colorado's Medicaid rolls have swelled rapidly since the onset of the economic crisis, this amount is dwarfed by the actual cost of covering enrollees. The number of people eligible for coverage—143,000—is three times as high as first estimated, and the cost of insuring them is nearly nine times more, according to a study by the Colorado Health Institute.

"Our original caseload numbers and costs were based on the information that existed two years ago," a spokesperson for the state's Department of Health Care Policy and Financing commented to the *Denver Post* August 31. "After more in-depth research, we found that the number of eligible clients and the costs per client were much higher than could be imagined."

Citing factors such as homelessness and higher rates of HIV and other chronic conditions among the poor, the state has said ensuring each such resident would cost an average of \$900 per month. This estimate is being used as a justification to eliminate childless adult coverage for all but those subsisting on less than 10 percent of the poverty line—a mere \$91 per month—and to cap enrollment at 10,000 people.

Tens of thousands of desperately poor and sick adults will be put on a waiting list that the state has already established. "We are being thoughtful and strategic about this implementation and are committed to being prudent and containing costs," the Department of Health Care Policy and Financing spokesperson said.

### **Tennessee governor warns of fatal cuts to safety net programs**

On Tuesday, Republican Governor Bill Haslam released a financial estimate of the impact federal budget cuts will have on Tennessee programs.

Federal spending accounts for approximately 40 percent of the

state's \$30 billion budget. The Haslam administration's estimate included a "worst case scenario" of a 30 percent cut in federal funding, which would result in a loss of \$4.5 billion.

TennCare, the state's Medicaid program, could be slashed by 25 percent—\$2.25 billion. This would trigger immediate reductions in reimbursement rates and the elimination of coverage for many services. Hundreds of thousands of Tennesseans would lose access to dental and optical care and other medical procedures.

The Department of Human Services would lose \$861 million. At least 3,000 health and human services workers would be axed. Health Department cuts would result in the loss of supplemental food and nutrition services for as many as 62,000 people.

Public schools would be cut by \$277 million; the state's Department of Transportation would bear a similar cut. As many as 36 unemployment offices and career centers would close.

Although these represent the "worst case," even the rosy estimates suggest that the Haslam administration is bracing for a 15 percent cut in federal funding. State officials have also warned that they anticipate a loss of as much as \$578 million in food stamp benefits over the next year.

### **Seventy percent of college students forego buying textbooks**

Most university students have foregone purchasing textbooks for courses, according to a survey conducted by the consumer advocacy organization US Public Interest Research Group. Seven in ten students said they had gone without a textbook at least once because they had found the price too high. Seventy-nine percent of respondents said they felt they would do worse in a class without the required books.

Most also reported they had purchased a book with a price that was inflated by common book publishing practices, such as the frequent release of new editions or "bundling," the pairing of books with other unnecessary items.

A separate analysis by the group found textbook costs are now typically comparable to 26 percent of state university tuition, and 72 percent of tuition at community colleges.



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