

# Notes on the social crisis in America

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## Without insurance, young father dies of tooth infection

A 24-year-old Ohio man died August 31 of complications from an infected tooth, doctors at University Hospital in Cincinnati said. Kyle Willis had suffered from an abscessed wisdom tooth for two weeks but because he was unemployed and uninsured, he could not afford to have it extracted.

His aunt, Patti Collins, told local NBC affiliate WLWT that Willis went to the emergency room when the pain became unbearable. “The doctors gave him antibiotic and pain medication. But he couldn’t afford to pay for the antibiotic, so he chose the pain meds, which was not what he needed,” she said. While the pain was alleviated, the infection spread, eventually causing his face and then his brain to swell.

Willis, a single father, leaves behind a 6-year-old daughter.

The tragedy is a stark expression of the health care crisis gripping millions of poor Americans. “When people are unemployed or don’t have insurance, where do they go? What do they do?” University of California dentist Irvin Silverstein commented to NBC News. “People end up dying, and these are the most treatable, preventable diseases in the world.”

“He [Willis] might as well have been living in 1927,” Vanderbilt University internal medicine director Jim Jirjis said. “All of the advances we’ve made in medicine today and are proud of, for people who don’t have coverage, you might as well never have developed those.”

A recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that one in three people skip dental care or checkups because they cannot afford them. More than 108 million Americans have no dental insurance, and millions more have only limited coverage that precludes many costly procedures.

## University of Georgia opens food pantry for hungry students

Student organizations at the University of Georgia opened a food pantry at its Athens campus to help students and staff who are going hungry. “A lot of people had to drop out of the meal plan this year,” a student volunteer told the *Athens Banner-Herald* September 8.

Tuition is rising in Georgia, at the same time that students have seen their grant aid cut. Thousands of working-class students have seen their HOPE scholarships reduced or eliminated with the new fiscal year.

“We have quite a number of students who are struggling to get by right now,” UGA Student Support Services head Alan Campbell said. “With the economic downturn, we are seeing more students struggling and it can create a bit of a vicious circle. Struggling students don’t want their parents to know, because it just adds to the family’s burden.” Campbell said students most in need have parents who have lost their jobs, or face expensive health costs. Many students have been forced out of the university, and some have had to live out of their cars.

Food insecurity is rising in Georgia. New figures from the US Department of Agriculture indicate that 16.9 percent of Georgia families are “food insecure,” meaning that they may not have enough food for everyone at some point during the year. The USDA reports that 6.4 percent of Georgia families are “very food insecure,” with some members regularly going hungry so that others can eat.

As need rises, food pantries have seen donations sharply decline and funding cut. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported last week that Angel Food Ministries, a low-cost food supplier to some 5,000 churches and community pantries, was suspending its services for the remainder of the month due to financial strain. The nonprofit laid off its entire staff of 90, although many continue to work on a volunteer basis.

Norcross Cooperative Ministry director Shirley Cabe told the paper their food bank serves 1,000 people a month, including many newcomers who have lost their jobs or have had their pay cut.

## St. Petersburg and Tampa, Florida move to curb homeless

## population

On Thursday, St. Petersburg, Florida Mayor Bill Foster called on neighboring city Tampa to keep their homeless population from migrating into Pinellas County in search of public services. Pinellas Safe Harbor, a homeless shelter that opened in January, is running at capacity with a daily population of 400. Homeless advocates estimate that Pinellas County has 5,000 homeless residents, and Tampa's Hillsborough County is home to twice as many.

The warning comes as the area prepares to host the 2012 Republican National Convention. "This needs to be dealt with," Foster said at a city council meeting, "especially since they have a high profile event coming up next year and they've done absolutely nothing to deal with that situation."

Tampa's city council, meanwhile, is considering three separate ordinances to clamp down on panhandling and begging along roadways. Solicitations outside of newspaper sales and so-called "expressive speech" would be banned under the laws. Last year, St. Petersburg banned beggars from approaching motorists for money, a law that effectively criminalized destitution and caused a considerable drop in the visibility of the large homeless population.

## Tennessee lawmaker calls for repeal of unemployment benefits extension

The chairman of a Tennessee legislative taskforce on jobs has stated that he favors repealing a newly enacted 20-week extension of unemployment benefits "to incentivize people to get back in the workforce." In May the state raised the maximum benefits limit from 79 to 99 weeks.

Republican Representative Jimmy Matlock made his comments after the first hearing of the Small Business and Economic Development Task Force September 7. "We're making it too easy... I think we've stretched it out too far," he said. The taskforce is primarily focused on loosening regulations over businesses and pursuing lower workers' compensation.

The official jobless rate for the state stands at 9.8 percent, and the labor force participation rate has fallen every year since 2008. The moves in Tennessee are part of a nationwide campaign to limit unemployment benefits under conditions of mass joblessness.

## Hundreds of children left without places in New York City school

As a consequence of numerous school closures and budget cuts citywide, hundreds of school children are without places as school begins in New York City. City officials have insisted it is typical for the beginning of the school year. Among those who have not been given places are some 500 disabled kindergartners.

Parents flooded registration offices across the city to find seats for their children. "I'm aggravated and depressed," one mother told the *New York Daily News* after her son was not offered a place at their neighborhood public school. Registration centers in Brownsville and in the Bronx reportedly had lines out the doors.

## Many middle-class children fall into poverty as adults

One third of Americans who grow up in middle-income families—defined as those between the 30th and 70th percentiles of the income distribution—fall into the lower income brackets when they reach adulthood.

Pew's Economic Mobility Project issued the finding September 6. "When asked to define the American dream, one of the more popular options chosen was 'your children being financially better off than you'," the report noted. Pew defined the 30th percentile as the lower bound for middle-income status because it is typically the income level at which most individuals become ineligible for public assistance programs, "and, as such, the life experiences of those just above and just below the cutoff may be qualitatively different."

The report found 28 percent of adults fell 20 percentiles or more below their parents' rank. Nineteen percent of adults had income at least 20 percent lower than that of their parents at a similar age. The findings are particularly stark given the far greater proportion of college-educated young adults today as compared to older generations who were more likely to be employed out of high school in manufacturing or unskilled labor.



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