

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Rhode Island homeless shelters overwhelmed by need

Rhode Island homeless shelters were filled to capacity in August, a first in the state's history. Advocates told the *Providence Journal* that the spike is directly related to mass job losses, and the consequent foreclosures and evictions. Officially, the state unemployment rate stands at 10.6 percent, one of the highest in the country.

"The numbers are definitely up," Providence Rescue Mission director Sean Carew told the paper. "And the homeless profile is changing. We're seeing a lot more mothers with daughters, people who are homeless for the first time. I talked to a licensed electrician recently who said, 'I never thought I'd lose my job. I never thought I'd lose my home.' A year ago we weren't seeing those kinds of people."

"There's a lag between the economic downturn and an increase in homelessness," Providence College professor Eric Hirsh explained. If unable to find work, those who lost their jobs in 2008 and 2009 would have run through unemployment benefits, savings and possessions over the years, then doubled up with relatives. "Then, they used up that resource—maybe it was too crowded—and now, they have no place to sleep," Hirsh said.

At Harrington Hall, a state-run homeless shelter for men in Warwick, nearly 100 men have sought beds each night at the 88-bed shelter over the summer.

The state's largest homeless shelter, Crossroads Rhode Island, has seen a doubling in those seeking beds in August over a year ago, to 163 per night. "One night, we had 41 people sleeping on the floor," Crossroads president Anne Nolan told the *Journal*. "This August, the number of men, women and families shot up and the state's other shelters were over capacity. That never happens."

Nolan said she feared an even bleaker situation was coming this winter, as the state implements deep cuts to shelter funding. A \$500,000 legislative grant for the shelter has been reduced to \$200,000, and other funding for its operations have been reduced by \$80,000. "We've got a Category-4 hurricane bearing down on us, and we're seeing the first bands of rain coming in," said Nolan.

Rising numbers of families unable to pay funeral costs

Communities across the country have reported rising numbers of unclaimed bodies held in coroners' offices and families seeking out indigent burial services. The increase has been felt "everywhere," National Association of Counties research and outreach director Jacqueline Byers told the Associated Press. "The reality is, it's gotten worse."

A survey of National Association of Medical Examiners membership found more than half of respondents reported an increase in unclaimed bodies. "This is the worst that I've seen, and I've been doing this kind of work since the late 1960s," said Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, coroner Walter Hofman.

McHenry County, Illinois, coroner Marlene Lantz told the *Herald News* that before the economic crisis hit, her office rarely saw a single unclaimed body. "We used to only see one every three or four years," said Lantz, who has been coroner since 1998. "It's a sign of the times. Families aren't as close as they used to be and the economy is tough." DuPage County, Illinois, reported several bodies left unclaimed for years, a previously unheard of situation in the relatively affluent area.

In the face of this rising need, Illinois eliminated its indigent burial program. The state had paid for more than 10,000 burials each year, although reimbursement rates to funeral homes were a fraction of the cost. As a result, local governments have had to take on more of the expense.

"We've all seen an increase," Jacksonville, Florida, indigent burial program administrator Johnnetta Moore said of service providers statewide. Moore noted that economic distress has compelled more families to cremate their loved ones. In fiscal year 2011, Jacksonville has cremated 306 poor residents, up from 297 the year before and 241 in 2009.

Columbus, Ohio, paid for 119 indigent burials last year; some of its neighboring communities, meanwhile, have opted not to provide burial assistance for the poor. "I have members tell me that they have had townships and municipalities that are very generous, while others will say, 'We know it's a responsibility, but sorry, we don't have enough money,'" Ohio Funeral Directors Association executive director Stephen Gehlert told the *Columbus Delaware News*.

Many other municipalities are in similar straits. Las Vegas, Nevada's Clark County recorded an increase of more than 10 percent in indigent burials over last year; in 2009, the county reported a spike of 22 percent. Hundreds of unclaimed bodies are buried in unmarked pauper's graves or cremated and stored in county-owned crypts each year. In Detroit, the Wayne County medical examiner's office is filled with scores of bodies it cannot afford to bury, many of them unclaimed for years.

Lexington, Kentucky charities denied federal funding

Fayette County, Kentucky, has been denied Federal Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) funding, the *Lexington Herald Leader* reports. The EFSP bases allocation levels to counties on official unemployment statistics, currently pegged at 7.2 percent. “Regrettably, this formula does not take into account the 2008 US Census data that ranked Kentucky the fifth-poorest state in the nation with 42,413 living below the poverty line in Fayette County alone,” Catholic Charities of Lexington’s Bridging the Gap coordinator Annie Ormsbee commented in a September 24 editorial in the paper.

EFSP funding was cut nationwide by 40 percent—\$80 million out of the already entirely inadequate \$200 million budget. Kentucky received a cut of 53 percent, or \$1.6 million. Last year, 11 Lexington-area non-profit organizations split \$161,000 in federal funds to help provide emergency shelter and food for hundreds of thousands of poor residents in the eastern half of the state.

More than 300 Fayette County families also received some assistance meeting their rent and utilities, and many unemployed residents sought out help for career readiness training, work clothing, and financial literacy programs. Without federal funding, these and other programs will be forced to shut down, leaving many families on the edge of homelessness, without resources to pay for housing or heat this winter.

The situation is already extremely dire for hundreds of thousands of Kentuckians. Emergency aid requests have surged in the state over the past several years. Lexington-based God’s Pantry, the sole food bank serving the eastern part of the state, has recorded double-digit increases in clients year after year. “We’ve seen huge increases in demand,” pantry representative Mandy Brajuha recently told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “In 2006 we were serving 159,000; now we’re serving 211,000 people.”

The pantry serves 12 of the 25 poorest counties in the US, home to more than 300,000 people living below the poverty line. Annual household income for God’s Pantry clients averages only \$8,760. Brajuha told the WWSW that 55 percent of the food distributed by the pantry was funded through federal dollars marked for elimination.

Arizona leads in student loan defaults

New figures from the US Department of Education show that more than 44,200 Arizona students were in default on federal loans in 2009, a rate of 16 percent. Officials pointed to the presence of for-profit colleges as a primary reason that the state’s rate is nearly double the national rate of 8.8 percent.

“What makes the state of Arizona unique is that it’s home to the University of Phoenix,” Education Deputy Undersecretary James

Kvaal explained in releasing the data. For-profit colleges have a 15 percent default rate, far higher than the 7.2 percent rate for public institutions and 4.6 percent rate of private schools in 2009.

The worsening economy, coupled with cutbacks on grant aid and rising tuition, has left many students and new graduates unable to repay debts. The national rate for defaults rose from 7 percent in 2008.

Without job prospects, college graduates have little choice but to move back in with their parents and push loans into forbearance plans. A poll recently conducted by consulting firm Twentysomething Inc. suggests that 85 percent of recent graduates are moving back home in 2011, up from 67 percent in 2006.

New York City threatens 100 schools with closure

New York City’s Department of Education issued a warning Friday to 100 public schools that they could be closed for poor test results. The number of elementary and middle schools receiving failing grades on annual performance tests more than doubled over last year after the city changed its grading system to assign 10 percent of all schools failing scores.

The change was part of a deliberate campaign to close struggling schools, lay off teachers, and terminate other crucial public services for working class families. The 2012 budget of billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg includes a \$500 million cut to the Department of Education and elimination of more than 6,100 teaching jobs. Since 2002, the city has shuttered 117 schools.

Class sizes have swelled to the highest rate in a decade as a result. A survey conducted by the United Federation of Teachers among its rank and file found that nearly 7,000 classes exceeded the maximum student-teacher ratio set by the union contract. Many held more than 35 students.



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