

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Philadelphia robberies attributed to hunger

Philadelphia police report that three men and a teenaged boy arrested in connection with multiple robberies said they committed the crimes because they suffered from hunger. None of the suspects, aged 38, 21, 19, and 17 years old, had been arrested on any offense before. Police have called the robberies “a sign of the times.”

Local ABC News affiliate WPVI 6 reported Thursday, “Police say they saw themselves as thieves with a conscience, targeting stores because they wanted to take money from companies instead of people.” Only commercial chain stores were hit in the course of the two-month series.

Philadelphia police chief Ben Naish commented at a press conference, “They said they were hungry. They said they were doing it for food.” Naish added, “They did make an indication that these are tough times, and this is the way they felt they could get money.”

The city has ranked among the worst in the country for hunger for several years in a row. Data from the Food Research and Action Center indicate that more than one in three Philadelphia families did not have enough money to buy adequate food in 2010.

More than 411,000 Philadelphia residents went to a food pantry for help in 2010, according to the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger. Half of food pantries and soup kitchens reported shortages, and were forced to turn people away because they ran out of food. Nearly two-thirds of volunteers reported that they spent their own money to help meet demand in the face of funding cuts.

Public defenders crippled by budget cuts

Most states have reduced court funding by 10 to 15 percent since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, according to a new report from the American Bar Association.

Over the same period, caseloads have soared, largely due to the collapse of the housing market, which pushed millions of people into foreclosure and bankruptcy. Maine has recorded a

50 percent increase in civil cases since 2006.

In California, budget cuts have slowed court proceedings to a crawl. San Francisco was forced to close 25 of its 63 courtrooms and lay off fully 40 percent of its workforce. As a result, wait times for hearings on minor offenses and proceedings such as traffic violations or divorce have stretched out to as long as six months.

“We’re seeing huge delays in getting trial dates and just getting standard documents processed,” San Francisco family law attorney Yasmine Mehmet commented to the AP. “The courts are just so overwhelmed. They just don’t have the people-power to handle these cases.”

New York’s Office of Court Administration faces a similar predicament after a \$170 million budget cut. Court now ends at 4:30pm, to prevent overtime pay, and judges have been told to call fewer potential jurors. Defendants now wait an average of 50 hours before seeing a judge, although they are supposed to be granted hearings within 24 hours.

“People were waiting two, three and four days at a time,” said Julie Fry, a representative of Legal Aid of Brooklyn lawyers. “Some are waiting for administrative code violations, like riding bicycles on the sidewalk or sleeping on a subway train.... This really disrupts people’s lives. Some of these people are on the cusp of being employed, and they can’t afford missing a few days of work.”

Under financial duress, Topeka, Kansas decriminalizes domestic violence

On October 11 the city council of Topeka, Kansas voted to repeal an ordinance banning domestic violence to save money on legal costs.

The Shawnee County District Attorney’s office, recently dealt a ten percent budget cut, announced in September that it was forced to cease prosecuting misdemeanor cases, including domestic violence cases, at the county level. As a result, the cost of those cases immediately fell onto the budget-starved city. Since mid-September, dozens of domestic violence cases have been dismissed.

Advocates for the victims of domestic violence warned that

the decriminalization would encourage retaliation and repeat offenses by abusers. “When an abusive partner is arrested, the victim’s danger level increases,” Becky Dickinson, interim director of the YWCA Center for Safety and Empowerment, told the *Topeka Capital-Journal* October 4. “The abuser will often become more violent in an attempt to regain control. Letting abusive partners out of jail with no consequences puts victims in incredibly dangerous positions.”

An October 21 march against domestic violence drew more than 150 Topeka residents to the statehouse steps.

Detroit schoolchildren face overcrowding, study without textbooks

On Thursday the Detroit fire marshal announced an investigation into overcrowding in the city’s public schools, after officials found severe overcrowding in multiple classrooms. Fire Marshal Herbert White cited Nolan Elementary for violating fire safety standards after finding 56 kindergartners in one classroom—twenty-one more than the legal limit.

Overcrowding is rampant throughout the district. Some high school classes exceed 70 students. Gompers Middle School teacher Dolly Osandusky told the *Detroit News*, “We are close to 45 in each seventh-grade class. Those are bigger bodies and there is only one exit in each of those rooms.”

“Overcrowding is not a minor issue here. They staffed us for 600 students and we have 1,000.” Osandusky said that students were so crowded they could not even move around the rooms.

Thousands of children are compelled to study without the aid of textbooks after the Detroit Public Schools cut spending on books by nearly half this year. The district cut its book budget from \$6.5 million to \$3.5 million.

Priest Elementary Middle School reported missing 3,460 books, mostly for English courses. At Cass Technical High School, teachers said they were short nearly 2,400 textbooks for history, science, and foreign language classes.

Cass Tech has contended with a shortage for years; in 2009, the *Detroit News* reported that DPS was subjected to a credit hold by book vendors over unpaid bills, preventing shipments of needed textbooks to the school.

120 school districts move to four-day school week

School districts across the country continue to lay off teachers and staff, cut transportation, and end sports, arts, and after-school programs. In 120 primarily rural districts, where funding

has long been stretched to the limit, schools have been forced to move to four-day weeks to cut transportation and utility costs.

Class sizes in Lancaster, Pennsylvania may rise from 25 to 40 in the next year. “I’m scared to death,” Abraham Lincoln Middle School principal Josh Keene told the Associated Press. “As we continue to look at fewer and fewer non-classroom positions that are there, at some point it’s going to impact core classroom positions and that’s a very, very scary thing.” The middle school serves a majority Latino and poor student body, with four out of five children considered low-income.

The Pennsylvania legislature slashed public education spending by \$900 million for the fiscal year that began July 1, a cut of 10 percent. As a result, 44 percent of school districts across the state reduced their course offerings, and 70 percent increased class sizes. Over 30 districts reduced or eliminated kindergarten or pre-kindergarten programs. The cuts reflect the loss of thousands of education jobs.

Since 2008, the US has seen a loss of 294,000 jobs in education, with many more projected to be cut over the coming years.

New Hampshire hospital to drop 3,500 Medicaid patients

LRGHealthcare, the largest health care company in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire, abruptly announced it was eliminating care for 3,500 Medicaid patients beginning in November. The company, which runs medical facilities in Andover, Franklin, Laconia, and elsewhere, cites state budget cuts as a justification for the purge, although it did not notify state Medicaid officials before sending letters to patients who will be affected.

The decision by LRGH is the third such move by a hospital company in the span of a week. Hospitals in Dover and Rochester announced similar changes in their enrollment policies last week and the curtailing of charity care.

Hospitals across New Hampshire have joined a lawsuit against the state over inadequate Medicaid reimbursement rates that have pushed health providers into the red. LRGH currently faces a \$4 million shortfall. With a new budget that imposes a Medicaid tax burden on providers, the company faces projected annual costs of \$9 million for uncompensated care.



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