

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Mother denied food stamps kills herself, shoots children

On Monday, a Laredo, Texas, woman killed herself and critically wounded her two children after being denied food stamps. Authorities said the 38-year-old mother had entered the local Texas Health and Human Services Commission office, demanding to speak to a supervisor about her case. She pulled a handgun on social workers in the office and took a supervisor hostage in a back room.

A police SWAT team evacuated some three-dozen people from the building and negotiated over the course of several hours for the supervisor's release. "About 11:45 last night, she hung up the phone with negotiators, and a little bit later negotiators heard three shots," a police investigator told the press Tuesday. "What had happened was that she had shot each of her children [aged 10 and 12] once and herself once."

"She had issues and felt that she had been let down by social services in general," he continued. "She was making all sorts of outlandish claims."

A spokeswoman for the state's department of social services confirmed to Reuters that the woman had been denied food stamps in July, saying her application was incomplete.

The tragedy speaks to desperate conditions that the most vulnerable sections of the population suffer, even as Texas and most other states slash billions of dollars from a strained social safety net (see "Texas plans drastic cuts to education, health care, and social services").

Much of Texas's caseload management is outsourced to call centers rather than being handled by in-office social workers, making the application process more opaque and complicated. Particularly for families who are tenuously housed and under-documented, meeting paperwork requirements and making repeat appointments is difficult. The Texas food stamp application is 18 pages long and requires proof of employment and residency.

Suicide rates rise in rural areas following Medicaid cuts

In predominantly rural states like Alaska, Wyoming and

Idaho, suicide rates have been on the rise. Health care advocates have attributed the increase to cuts in Medicaid and the closure of mental health offices.

"The poor economy and unemployment—those put a lot of stress on people's lives," Kathie Garrett, co-chair of the Idaho Council on Suicide Prevention, told ABC News. "I personally know people who lost Medicaid who've attempted suicide."

To avoid high bills, many go without needed prescriptions or checkups. In addition, the closure of rural mental health offices will force patients to drive hundreds of miles for therapy.

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare lists suicide among the leading causes of death. Among residents aged 15 to 24, it is the second leading cause of death behind accidents.

Tacoma, Washington, to make deep cuts in firefighting

Tacoma, Washington's city council detailed \$23 million in cuts Tuesday night before a packed meeting. At least 167 city workers—11 percent of the workforce—received layoff notices effective next month. The city is attempting to offset its \$31 million budget shortfall.

Among those to be cut are at least 42 firefighters. At least two fire stations will be shuttered, and four neighborhood fire companies will be eliminated. The city's fireboat services will be "eliminated, for all intents and purposes," Fire Chief Ron Stephens said.

Some 400 residents attended the meeting, most of them angry at the cuts. "When something happens to a family due to these cuts you've made, no amount of numbers in the black will matter," one resident said.

A new Tacoma firefighter said that he received a pink slip during his very first shift. He said, "Seventy-two hours after I graduated the academy, I got my certificate. Three days later, I got my layoff notice."

He continued: "It's been tough, disheartening. I gave up a lot to do this. I'm not alone. My classmates and the class ahead of us—people moved from the other side of the country, gave up very good jobs. People moved with their kids, kids had to move schools."

21 million children receive subsidized school lunches

Three million more students have enrolled in the federal school meals program since 2006-2007, a 17 percent increase, bringing to 21 million the number of public school children dependent on subsidized lunches. Eleven states—including Florida and Nevada, where the housing market and construction industry collapsed—registered increases of more than 25 percent.

Children in families living on up to 130 percent of the official poverty line, or \$29,055 for a family of four, qualify for free school lunches. A four-member household with income of no more than \$41,348 is eligible for reduced price lunches. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 52 percent of fourth graders are now enrolled in the lunch program.

“These are very large increases and a direct reflection of the hardships American families are facing...people like myself who do research are struggling to keep up with it,” University of Minnesota economist Benjamin Senauer told the *New York Times*.

Roseville, Minnesota, a suburb of St. Paul, saw its subsidized lunch enrollment rise from 29 percent in 2006-2007 to 44 percent this fall. “There’s a lot of hurt in the suburbs,” Dr. Senauer said. “It’s the new face of poverty.”

The rise in subsidized lunch enrollment tracks the enormous growth of poverty over the past several years. Suburban areas in particular have seen a growth in “extreme poverty,” or half the official poverty line, twice the rate of cities. Such impoverishment in Midwestern suburbs has climbed 79 percent in the last decade (see “Sharp rise in extreme-poverty neighborhoods in the US since 2000”).

Hundreds line up for affordable housing in Washington, D.C.

Low-income residents lined up overnight November 28 in the Washington, D.C., neighborhood of Columbia Heights, hoping to apply for affordable housing. The *Washington Post* reported a line stretching three city blocks outside the doors of newly renovated Hubbard Place apartments. Entire families camped out under blankets and trash bags to keep out the cold and rain. Shouting matches broke out over keeping places in line.

The *Post* noted that the families were vying for “one of 100 coveted spots on the complex’s waiting list. About 10 units become available in the federally-subsidized 230-unit complex in a given year.”

Over the past decade, D.C. has lost one third of its low-cost rental inventory. At the same time, the city has gentrified,

opening new units for high-income residents, a trend that has inflated rent rates across the board. Stagnating incomes and high unemployment have pushed residents out of the city or into tenuous, overcrowded housing situations. Since 2007, D.C.’s homeless population has risen 14 percent and the waiting list for public housing assistance has grown to 20,000.

“There are a lot of people that need housing, a lot of homeless right now,” Katherine Felder, a security guard who had waited overnight, told the *Post*. After losing her apartment this year, Felder had been staying with relatives. She was caring for two granddaughters, ages 3 and 2.

“I don’t have anywhere to stay,” she said. “I’m cold, wet and soaked to the bone, soaked from my head to my toes. Cold, cold, cold. Haven’t slept all night.”

“Man camps” boom in North Dakota oil fields

Oil firms in the North Dakota prairie have erected temporary housing compounds for thousands of male workers, including many who have traveled from Michigan and other economically distressed states in search of jobs. North Dakota has an official unemployment rate of 3.5 percent, by far the lowest in the nation.

In Mountrail County, one third of the population now lives in camps. Target Logistics, the largest operator of “man camps,” estimates that within a year it will house 1 percent of the state’s population.

The housing units are not subject to zoning ordinances or permits. While some are pitched as “dormitory-style” with laundry facilities and recreation rooms, others lack sewer lines and basic amenities. At some camps, men sleep in shifts. Local officials recently shut down a camp near Williston because the operator allowed sewage to flow freely over the grounds.

Workers arriving at the camps face long waiting lists for housing, often living out of their cars for weeks on end, even while pulling long hours on the rigs. Motel rooms are booked for years in advance, and rent rates have quadrupled in the past few years.



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