Notes on the social crisis in America

Naomi Spencer
29 December 2011

House fires claim multiple lives over Christmas weekend

A Stamford, Connecticut house fire that claimed three children and their grandparents made national news headlines on Christmas Day. Investigators stated that the blaze was caused by a fireplace mishap in the old Victorian home.

At least 17 other people were killed and dozens more displaced by fires over the holiday weekend. On Christmas Eve, a four-year-old Columbus, Ohio boy, his mother and her boyfriend died in a fire, in a home thought by neighbors to be vacant.

The mother, 22-year-old Jerrica Francisco, was wheelchair-bound with muscular dystrophy. Neighbors said the home did not have kitchen appliances, and gas had been shut off on Saturday. "I would say this house probably should not have been rented," an uncle of the deceased man told a local NBC affiliate. "I just think it was unlivable conditions."

The west side Columbus neighborhood, lined with century-old homes, has been devastated by blight. Neighbors and relatives spoke angrily of a previous house fire directly across the street from the latest blaze. That fire claimed the lives of a teenage mother and her three young children.

Fires over the weekend also claimed the lives of two California residents; a mother and son in Catahoula, Mississippi; a Charlotte, North Carolina man; an elderly Las Vegas, Nevada woman; a woman in Huntsville, Alabama; and, in separate house fires, at least seven Louisiana residents.

The number of fatal fires is likely to rise in January, when the federal government slashes over a billion dollars from its subsidized Home Energy Assistance Program, wiping out more than a fifth of the total allocation.

Hospital emergency rooms taxed by indigent mentally ill patients

Hospitals are in danger of being overwhelmed by uninsured patients desperate for mental health care. Since 2008, state governments have gutted some $3.4 billion from mental health service budgets, leaving those poor and in need of help at the mercy of emergency room staff. Over the same period, demand for services has spiked.

"These are people without a previous psychiatric history who are coming in and telling us they've lost their jobs, they've lost sometimes their homes, they can't provide for their families, and they are becoming severely depressed," Dr. Felicia Smith at Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital told Reuters December 24. "We've seen actually more very serious suicide attempts in that population than we had in the past as well." The hospital's psychiatric emergency department has seen a 20 percent increase in caseloads over the past three years.

University of Illinois Medical Center at Chicago emergency room physician William Sullivan related that he had recently treated a newly homeless patient who was suicidal. "He had been homeless for about two weeks," Dr. Sullivan told Reuters. "He hadn't showered or eaten a lot. He asked if we had a meal tray… It seemed almost as if he was interested in being admitted."

A survey of 600 hospital ER administrators taken last year found more than 70 percent of departments had kept patients waiting for care for 24 hours. Ten percent said they had "boarded" patients for a week or longer.

Waiting rooms are not well equipped to cope with mental illness, making long wait times harder on sensitive patients. "They don't have secure holding rooms. They don't have quiet spaces. They don't have a lot of things you need to help calm down a person in an acute psychiatric crisis,"

California Psychiatric Association director Randall Hagar said. "Often you have a patient strapped to a gurney in a hallway outside of the emergency department where social workers are desperately trying to find an inpatient bed."

Copper thefts leave streets dark

Copper thefts across the US have rendered many freeway lights and traffic signals dark. Some municipalities cannot afford to replace copper wiring.

In Lexington, Kentucky, hundreds of lights are out along the busy interchange of Interstates 64 and 75, creating a hazard for motorists. Similarly, Hawaii's H-1 and H-2 freeways have been dark for several years because of copper theft. The wiring was replaced once and almost immediately stolen again to be sold for scrap.

The city of Vallejo, California, left without functioning traffic lights at five major intersections and unable to afford replacement copper, posted four-way stop signs and a warning: "Signal Lights are Non-Functioning Due To Copper Wire Theft."

Hundreds of south Florida households were left without phone service December 24 after telephone utility boxes were stripped. It is the fifth copper theft from local phone boxes in the past week.

The Tennessee Valley Authority has likewise been plagued by thefts. "On a weekly basis we're dealing with copper theft," TVA police director David Jolley told local NBC affiliate WBIR.

The thefts are driven by desperate economic circumstances and high prices for copper. Over the past five years, the metal's price has soared by 50 percent.

"The knee-jerk reaction is thinking they're drug addicts trying to find a quick buck to make it to their next fix," Mid-Atlantic Innovative Technology Center Jeremy Schoenfelder told *USA Today* December 27. "People are involved in this because it's a smart business. It's an illegal business, but it's a smart business." Schoenfelder conducted a study of copper thefts for the state of Arizona, finding an increase in the stripping of streetlights over the removal of old copper

from vacant houses.

Typically scrap dealers will pay out $3 to $3.50 per pound, a significant amount for the poor, but at a significant risk to thieves. In economically distressed regions such as Appalachia, hundreds of people are seriously burned each year attempting to strip copper from power lines.

Hundreds of youth erupt in melee at Mall of America

A near-riot involving more than 200 teenagers erupted Monday afternoon at the Bloomington, Minnesota Mall of America, the nation's largest shopping center. The day after Christmas is traditionally one of the busiest shopping days of the year, as retailers slash their prices.

According to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, a fight in the mall's food court broke out around 4 p.m., then swelled into a brawl involving 50 youths. Police arrested at least ten during the initial altercation, and mall officials said calm had been restored by 5:30 p.m.

However, fights continued to break out, and at one point groups involving more than 100 people rushed through the mall court, knocking down shoppers and kiosks. Stores closed internal gates to the court, affecting a lockdown. Both participants and bystanders were set into a near-panic during the incident. "I'm used to screaming," a young witness told the *Star Tribune*, "but this was a different kind of screaming."

"There was definitely a scary hum in the mall and a lot of parents on their cell phones trying to find their kids," another witness told the newspaper. While media accounts described the crowd as a "smash and grab flash mob," Bloomington police Commander Mark Stehlik said police received no reports of stolen merchandise and no weapons were involved.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact