

Notes on the social crisis in America

Naomi Spencer
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Thousands line up for subsidized housing in cities nationwide

Nearly 600 Bloomington, Indiana residents lined up in the hope of securing an application for Section 8 housing subsidies on December 28. The Bloomington Housing Authority was handing out 300 applications for subsidies on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Local news reports described disarray and anger in the long line. Although applicants were told not to show up before 8:45 a.m., lines formed beginning at 5:30 a.m. Shortly after 9 a.m., those who arrived on time were turned away.

Organizers, who distributed 200 fewer applications at the event than at a similar one the year before, said they would host a second round in May. "If we create more hope in the community by doing a lesser number and more frequently we think it will create more hope and people will be able to be housed sooner," Housing Authority supervisor Janet Tyree told Indiana Public Media.

In New Haven, Connecticut, the scene was repeated as 500 people crowded into the local housing authority office for a rent subsidy "lottery." Organizers predicted they would receive 4,000 applications for 900 spots on a years' long waiting list.

In Tucson, Arizona, a three-day application period beginning December 13 drew a record 9,000-10,000 applications. "This is my first time here," one applicant told Arizona Public Media. "I was amazed because there are so many people. I pay rent like \$500 and I only make a little over \$850 a month."

Low wages and lack of affordable housing are the leading causes of homelessness. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that between 2007 and 2009, the shortage of available affordable rental units for poor households rose from 5.2 million to 6 million. Over the same period, the economic crisis has pushed millions of families into foreclosure, joblessness, and poverty.

Many areas have closed applications for subsidized housing altogether. In Williamsburg, Virginia, hundreds of families have been on a waiting list for more than three years to get into 104 subsidized units. "It doesn't help to get people's hopes up by taking their applications when there's no chance they'll get a unit anytime soon," local housing authority director Andy Hungerman told the *Virginia Gazette* December 28.

Pervasive blight in New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina

Nearly six and a half years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Louisiana, tens of thousands of blighted buildings remain standing. The Census Bureau found that 110,000 residents did not return to their homes after the storm. The US Postal Service records some 42,000 vacant homes where mail is not collected by owners. According to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, one in four housing units were vacant in 2010.

Since coming to office in 2010, Mayor Mitch Landrieu has spearheaded a campaign to raze or seize unoccupied houses. With the limited recovery aid available to residents long dried up, the city has sought to place the financial burden of repairs and cleanup entirely on residents. "What happened is we got better at what we're supposed to be doing," Landrieu commented to Reuters in a recent interview, "and that, by getting more aggressive, property owners know we're coming and know we mean consequences so they start to self-correct."

The city demolished nearly 1,600 blighted properties in 2011. Residents complained that the city leaves foundations behind on houses, effectively preventing reuse of the land. According to the *Times-Picayune*, the city has also filed more than 1,000 writs to seize and sell properties that have not been maintained. Revenue from so-called "blight fines" has risen from \$703,000 in 2010 to \$1.65 million in 2011.

Drop in corporate tax collections feeds Pennsylvania budget crisis

Declining corporate tax revenues are driving a shortfall in the Pennsylvania budget, the state's Department of Revenue reported in December. For 2011, corporate tax collections were \$167 million, 18.2 percent below estimates. The drop represents "the most money and the highest percentage shortfall of all classes of tax," the *Patriot News* reported December 31.

Corporate taxes account for 18 percent of the state's total revenue. "Taxes paid by common citizens, on the other hand,"

the paper notes, “account for the majority of state revenue, [and] are only slightly lower than expected. ... Revenues from personal income and sales taxes last year were both the second-highest ever.”

Department of Revenue head Charles Zogby warned that, even after the imposition of an austerity budget, essential public programs would face further cuts or freezes in funding. “I wish I could stand up here and say that we have a robust economy with lots of growing revenues that we’re going to be able to invest in areas like education or cutting taxes,” he said in a statement December 21. “But we’re not in that position. So we have to deal with the reality of the world that we’re in, not what we maybe would like to see.”

“I think many folks thought that the budget that we just came through was a difficult one, and it was,” Zogby commented. “But in many respects, 2012-13 is going to be an even more difficult challenge. The low-hanging fruit ... has been picked.”

Governor Tom Corbett, a Republican, has already called for a mid-year spending freeze and ordered state agencies to draft budgets accounting for a five percent cut.

Youth in US prison system subject to inhumane conditions

Some 2,570 youth are serving sentences of life without parole in adult prisons in the US. These prisoners, convicted for crimes they committed as minors, are subjected to hellish conditions that violate their human rights, a study by Human Rights Watch found.

The US is the only country in the world with prisoners serving sentences of life without parole for crimes committed as children. Many youth offenders enter adult prison while they are still children, before their trials are concluded.

After hundreds of interviews with incarcerated youth and prison officials, Human Rights Watch found that “nearly every youth offender serving life without parole reported physical violence or sexual abuse by other inmates or corrections officers.”

A young prisoner in California told human rights investigators that he was “scared to death. I was all of 5’6”, 130 pounds and they sent me to PBSP [Pelican Bay State Prison]. I tried to kill myself because I couldn’t stand what the voices in my head was saying ... ‘You’re gonna get raped.’ ‘You won’t ever see your family again.’”

Suicidal thoughts, terror, and deep depression are common. In addition to the brutal conditions in which they find themselves, young prisoners are tormented by feelings of hopelessness at the lack of prospects for the future, including the absence of rehabilitative, educational, or vocational training. This deprivation constitutes a punishment of excessive cruelty, Human Rights Watch concludes.

“I would be ever grateful for the chance to spend my life now for some good reason,” a young prisoner in Arkansas told interviewers. “I would go to the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan ... or jump on the first manned mission to Mars. ... If the state were to offer me some opportunity to end my life doing some good, rather than a slow-wasting plague to the world, it would be a great mercy to me.”

Florida public broadcasting services slashed

Public radio and television stations throughout Florida have reduced programming and staff in the past six months after Republican Governor Rick Scott vetoed \$4.8 million in state funding. Every public television station lost more than \$300,000, and public radio broadcasters lost over \$60,000.

Broadcasters are considering substantially expanding corporate sponsorship. Tampa community radio WMNF-FM held a scrap metal drive in an effort to make up some of the difference after an initial outpouring of community support dried up, and is now planning a golf tournament. “There’s no sugar daddy out there to replace the [\$62,000] the governor took away from us,” WMNF news director Rob Lorei told the *Tampa Bay Times*.

WEDU 3, the Tampa Bay area public television channel, has seen its budget reduced from \$11 million in 2007 to \$7 million in 2011. Even after repeated fundraisers, the station fell \$200,000 short of making up for the \$435,000 that was cut by the state.

The cuts are of a piece with the attacks on social services such as libraries, public education, and cultural programs. According to media watchdog organization Free Press, public broadcasting stations in 24 states have lost \$85 million in state funding since 2008.

At the federal level, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s two-year \$445 million budget has been tied to a requirement that it research non-governmental funding sources. This stipulation signals the likelihood of future cuts to the already barebones allocation.



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