

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Central Alabama hit again by tornados

At least ten tornados tore through central Alabama on Monday, killing two people and injuring at least 100 others. A report in the *Birmingham News* noted that the storms came nearly nine months after the April 27 tornado disaster prompted state and federal officials to promise devastated communities funding for hundreds of storm shelters that have yet to materialize.

DeKalb County had applied, and been approved, for Federal Emergency Management Agency funding to build shelters well before the 2011 disaster brought seven tornados through the county.

In many areas, shelters will not be installed by the spring. "It's heartbreaking," DeKalb County's emergency management director, Anthony Clifton, commented. "Because of administrative issues, they were not in place in those communities on April 27. Now, to go through a second season without them in place is just unconscionable."

Uninsured patients seeking dental care crowd hospital emergency rooms

Government-funded health care programs such as Medicaid and Medicare offer little to no coverage for dental care in many states. Patients with painful tooth infections, abscesses or other potentially life-threatening dental emergencies have increasingly sought out hospital emergency rooms for help, a 2010 report from the Health Resources and Services Administration found. Between 1.3 and 2.7 percent of ER visits not resulting in hospital admission are dental emergencies.

Alan Sorkey, a Shreveport, Louisiana emergency room physician, told *USA Today* January 19 that of the 6,336 patients he treated last year, 226 of them suffered from toothaches. In most cases, patients are given pain medication or antibiotics to temporarily relieve the symptoms and sent

away. One consequence, Sorkey noted, is that "these patients become addicted to the narcotic pain medicine."

At least 11 states offer no Medicaid coverage for adult dental care, including South Carolina and Washington state, both of which cut such coverage from their Medicaid programs last year. In many other states, including Louisiana and Kentucky, Medicaid will pay only for complete extraction and replacement by dentures, but not preventive or restorative care.

New Mexico: Two years solitary confinement for drunk driving charge

New Mexico resident Stephen Slevin, arrested in August 2005 on a charge of driving while intoxicated, was thrown into solitary confinement at the Dona Ana County jail. There he was held, without trial or basic medical care, for two years.

Slevin's case, which came to media attention this week after a federal jury awarded him \$22 million for inhumane treatment, highlights the barbaric conditions in US jails.

During his imprisonment, his physical and mental health deteriorated drastically. According to Slevin's attorney, Matt Coyte, the jail often held his client without even time out for exercise or showers. He developed a fungal infection underneath his skin and his toenails grew until they curled below his feet. A 2007 jail release photo shows Slevin pale, with long hair and a shaggy, matted beard; in his booking photo, he is clean-shaven and appears in good health.

At one point while imprisoned, Slevin was forced to pull his own tooth because he was denied access to a dentist. He was refused any consultation with a doctor over depression or pain. "Your insanity builds. Some people holler or throw feces out their cell doors," Coyte told a local NBC affiliate January 24. "Others rock back and forth under a blanket for a year or more, which is what my client did."

Guards were "walking by me every day, watching me deteriorate," Slevin said. "Day after day after day, they did

nothing, nothing at all, to get me any help.”

California jails swelling with state prisoners

After a US Supreme Court order mandating states to relieve overcrowded prisons, Democratic Governor Jerry Brown pledged to reduce the California state prison population—the largest in the country.

Since October, California’s so-called “realignment” program has shifted thousands of inmates who were serving sentences for nonviolent crimes into county jails. The plan did not change the sentencing terms for offenses, however. This has created problems at local jails, which are not equipped to house prisoners on a long-term basis.

“We have minimum-security facilities, and we’re getting maximum-security folks,” Contra Costa County Custody Services Commander Matthew Schuler told Pew Center on the States’ *stateline.org*. Many prisoners are grappling with mental illness or have gang affiliations that aggravate an already antagonistic atmosphere.

Methamphetamine production accidents overwhelming hospital burn units

In states where methamphetamine addiction is high, up to one-third of burn unit patients were hurt while making the drug, an Associated Press survey of hospitals reveals. The cost of treating these largely uninsured and impoverished patients, most suffering from severe burns, have contributed to the closure of some burn wards. The average treatment of meth-accident patients costs \$6,000 per day.

Most of the accidents are attributed to a cheap, improvised method of producing the drug called “shake-and-bake.” The drug maker combines small quantities of the ingredients in a container and shakes it, producing a highly volatile chemical concoction. “From what we see on the medical side, that’s the primary reason the numbers seem to be going up: greater numbers of producers making smaller batches,” St. Louis’ Mercy Hospital burn unit director, Dr. Michael Smock, told the AP.

The meth-related burns are especially damaging because they are both thermal and chemical, and often inflict the worst damage to the most sensitive areas of the body. “I don’t think a lot of these patients will be able to re-enter society,” University of Iowa burn center doctor Lucy

Wibbenmeyer said. “They’ll need rehab therapy, occupational therapy, which is very expensive.”

Toxic coal ash dumping on the rise

Three years after the Kingston, Tennessee coal ash disaster, utility companies are pumping higher levels of the toxic energy generation byproduct into impoundment lakes. Chemicals strongly associated with cancer, birth defects and other health problems leach out into surrounding water supplies.

An analysis of federal Toxics Release Inventory data by the Environmental Integrity Project revealed that power plants dumped waste containing 113.6 million pounds of toxic metals and compounds containing arsenic, chromium and lead into impoundments in 2010. The amount represents a 9 percent increase over the year before.

Twenty power plants account for more than half of the waste; 10 of these plants are located in the US South. The Tennessee Valley Authority, responsible for the Kingston spill, operates some of the worst polluting plants in the country.

Over the same period, the Obama administration and its state-level counterparts have moved to block regulation of such industrial pollution. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has documented more than 130 cases of coal ash contaminating water supplies and causing other environmental damage, has become a central target of the effort.

Utility companies have lobbied heavily to block oversight of industrial pollution. Several federal bills have been aimed at stripping EPA enforcement over coal ash, including one passed by the House in October sponsored by West Virginia Republican David McKinley. At the state level, governors in Kentucky and West Virginia have joined energy and coal operators in a lawsuit to block the EPA from any regulation over water pollution.



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