

# Notes on the social crisis in America

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## Life expectancies in poor US counties compare to developing nations

Growth in life expectancy for women has stalled or regressed in 661 counties across the United States since 1999, a new report by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation finds. “It’s tragic that in a country as wealthy as the United States and with all the medical expertise we have that so many girls will live shorter lives than their mothers,” Dr. Ali Mokdad, the IHME US County Performance research team leader said in announcing the report.

Since 1989, life expectancies have increased by 4.6 years for men and 2.7 years for women overall. IHME Director William Heisel commented that the increase is “not a great improvement. That’s far behind the countries that are doing the best.”

The findings expose as a lie the claims by politicians that the US has the best health care system in the world. Millions of poor families have no health insurance and little access to basic care, leading to earlier deaths from treatable conditions. In rural areas of the south and Appalachia, the poor experience life expectancies equivalent to populations of the most war-torn and disaster-stricken regions of the world.

Average male life expectancy in 2009 was 76.2 years; women lived 81.3 years on average. In two long-term distressed Mississippi counties, Quitman and Tunica, male life expectancy stood at just 66.1 years—equivalent to Pakistan. In Marin County, California, by contrast, men lived on average to the age of 81.6 years.

The life expectancy for women ranged from a high of 85.8 years on average in Collier County, Florida, to 74.1 years in McDowell County, West Virginia. McDowell, ground zero of the collapse of Appalachian mining industry, bears the closest comparison to Algeria in terms of life expectancy.

## West Virginia ranks last in health

West Virginia ranked worst among the 50 US states by measures of heart attack, cancer, diabetes, depression, high blood pressure, obesity, and several other conditions in a 2011 Gallup Healthways survey. More than 35 percent of West Virginians are obese, a condition that contributes to other health problems. Some 39 percent reported high blood pressure, 33.5 percent had high cholesterol, and 15.7 percent had diabetes. Nearly one in four West

Virginians have been clinically diagnosed with depression.

The state political establishment has presented the epidemic as primarily the fault of individuals and the lack of education about health. Of several recent laws aimed at improving education of residents and their children, most have been abandoned. One, called the Healthy Lifestyles Act, was not implemented. An office called “GOHELP,” which was created to fulfill the mandates of the Healthy Lifestyles Act is unstaffed.

## Obama administration throws out child farm labor rules

After backtracking for months, the federal Labor Department has withdrawn altogether a proposal to tighten child labor laws to include minors who work for agricultural firms. The proposal, introduced last year, has been the subject of intense attack from right-wing corporate groups. The rule would have banned children younger than 16 from operating heavy equipment, and prohibited any minor from working inside highly dangerous grain silos, stockyards, and feed lots.

Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations. The fatality rate for child farm workers is four times higher than in other industries. Nearly 2 million children work on US farms. As many as 22,000 are seriously injured each year, and nearly 100 die in farm-related accidents.

In a recent statement, the Labor Department stressed, “To be clear, this regulation will not be pursued for the duration of the Obama administration.” Republican and Democratic representatives of more rural states hailed the withdrawal. Minnesota’s Democratic Senator Al Franken said the decision was “a good outcome”; Montana Democrat Jon Tester pledged to “fight any measure that threatens our heritage and our rural way of life.”

While the focus of lobbying groups, politicians, and most media coverage centered on children working beside their parents on small family farms, those who would have most benefited from the regulations include thousands of migrant children who do dangerous and backbreaking seasonal work on large-scale operations. The Obama administration “came under incredible pressure, and they caved to that pressure,” Human Rights Watch deputy director of children’s rights Zama Coursen-Neff commented to the Associated Press.

## Arrests of young children on the rise

The arrests of several schoolchildren across the country in recent weeks point to a disturbing trend: the routine use of police in public schools, even at the elementary level. On April 11, a six-year-old Georgia kindergartner was handcuffed in the office of the school principal after allegedly “throwing a tantrum.” Salecia Johnson was said to be crying and attempting to break picture frames at Creekside Elementary, when Milledgeville police arrived and handcuffed her.

The child’s mother, Constance Ruff, acknowledged that her daughter struggled with emotional outbursts, but protested the arrest. “She has mood swings some days, which all of us had mood swings some days,” Ruff told local television station WMAZ 13. “She might have misbehaved, but I don’t think she misbehaved to the point where she should have been handcuffed and taken downtown to the police department.” Ruff said the girl has been suspended and is not allowed to return to school until August.

In a similar incident April 18, a six-year-old Shelbyville, Indiana boy was arrested after allegedly throwing a tantrum and kicking his school principal. Shelbyville Police Lieutenant Michael Turner defended the decision, saying, “Putting him into the system can open up avenues perhaps the parents don’t have.”

A Justice Policy Institute report notes to the contrary that arrested youth “face numerous collateral consequences.” Children can carry the stigma of past run-ins with the law, greater antagonism in the schools and with authority figures, and thus the likelihood of repeat, escalating offenses.

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, a 13-year-old girl was arrested after refusing to move to another seat after a teacher told her to stop chatting with a friend. That arrest triggered a class-action civil rights lawsuit. “Kids are being arrested for being kids,” Shannon Kennedy, an attorney in the case said. Hundreds of children have been arrested in the Albuquerque public school district in the past few years, for breaking rules against having cell phones in the classroom, defacing textbooks, or inflating a condom as a joke.

Teachers have pointed out that they are overwhelmed by large class sizes, children with emotional and behavioral problems, and lack of support systems within the schools.

No nationwide count is kept on student arrests, although the National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 2010, some 60 percent of public schools called in police for assistance.

In Connecticut, court officials began a count last year; since March of 2011, nearly 1,700 students were arrested, the vast majority for “breach of peace” offenses such as hallway squabbles and disorderly conduct. In Texas, an advocacy group found that more than 275,000 non-traffic-related tickets were issued against minors every year. Most of the tickets are for classroom disruptions and disorderly conduct.

A national survey of police departments suggests a rising number of domestic conflicts are related to stressful financial circumstances. Overall, violent crimes have declined since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, but domestic violence reports have risen.

In 2011, the Camden, New Jersey police department responded to 9,100 domestic incidents. This is up from 7,500 the year before. Camden Police Chief Scott Thomson told *USA Today* that it was “impossible” to separate the family problems from the economic duress of the city. Unemployment stands at 19 percent in Camden. “When stresses in the home increase because of unemployment and other hardships, domestic violence increases,” Thomson said. “We see it on the street.”

“You are dealing with households in which people have lost jobs or are in fear of losing their jobs,” Police Executive Research Forum director Chuck Wexler told the paper. “That is an added stress that can push people to the breaking point.”

## Deaths at Tennessee mental hospital highlight understaffing, funding cuts

James Hodge, 53, was killed by his roommate April 19 at the state-operated Middle Tennessee Mental Health Institute, after the two men were supposed to have been held in separate areas of the facility. Thaddeus Odom had been in a fight with Hodge earlier in the day, but the two were left to wander freely in common areas after the altercation. Odom has been charged with murder for inflicting fatal head injuries on Hodge in a day room of the hospital.

On November 29, 43-year-old Cody Skelton committed suicide after he was left unattended in a shower area. Skelton, a new patient at the hospital, was supposed to be on suicide watch.

Tom Starling, executive director of the Tennessee office of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, told the *Tennessean* newspaper that funding cuts to state hospitals have translated into less staff and training. “The mental health system is under constant constraints due to insufficient funding. We have been lobbying and lobbying for the last ten years. Every year, we have to fight in the legislature to make sure that the mental health budget does not get cut even more. We are at bare-bones budgeting now.”



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## Economic crisis fuels spike in domestic violence