

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Number of homeless schoolchildren in Michigan soars

The number of homeless schoolchildren in Michigan has risen by over 300 percent since the onset of the economic crisis, according to the Michigan Department of Education. The state's Homeless Education Programs confirmed to Grand Rapids ABC-affiliate WZZM 13 that as-yet unreleased 2011-2012 data would likely show an additional increase of 30 percent.

A report by WZZM 13 noted that many homeless students were living with families that "have been forced to move around and stay where they can."

Like many financially strained cities, Grand Rapids has little in the way of emergency assistance programs for families that are struggling. Because of this, the scale of the homeless epidemic is not reflected in official figures. WZZM 13 noted that it "stumbled across this issue after a co-worker saw a school bus pull up to a motel near the station and drop off some students."

"It's hard, cramped, not enough room, but we'll do it until we find a place to live," said one mother who was living in a motel room with her husband and first-grade son. A 15-year-old student said, "We were staying with other people and we didn't have our own place at the time and we had to stay in a motel."

Homeless man gets arrested intentionally to get a meal

Frequently presented in local media as "offbeat" news items are periodic reports of hungry, homeless individuals who deliberately provoke their own arrest in order to get some food and temporary shelter. In Columbus, Georgia last month, 36-year-old Lance Brown reportedly threw a brick through a glass door of the courthouse to be put in jail, where "someone's going to offer me a sandwich and a drink."

Brown had previously been in prison on a robbery conviction, and had been homeless since last summer. He had been kicked out of a local shelter after suffering a nervous breakdown and getting into a fight with another resident.

The case illustrates the desperate, Catch-22 situations confronting thousands of ex-convicts in the United States. Ex-cons frequently are unable to secure employment because of the stigma of a criminal record. Many fall into the informal workforce, black market economy, and homelessness. The adult male homeless population—with high rates of mental illness, chronic health conditions, drug dependency, and hunger—face deeply inadequate social assistance options; most cannot qualify for welfare or health insurance programs no matter how dire their financial status.

Brown had reportedly gone to the courthouse in order to ask his probation officer what he could do to get back behind bars. The officer gave him instead a list of social service providers. Brown then allegedly issued a feeble threat to kill the president, which the officers dismissed on the spot as not credible. After being turned out of the courthouse, Brown threw a brick at the building. Brown was charged by federal authorities with malicious mischief for the act; he was sentenced to one month in jail and three years' probation.

Widening state program privatizations

State governments are increasingly privatizing services to cut budget costs, according to the pro-privatization Reason Foundation. A new report from the organization lauds the sell-offs of everything from lottery systems and liquor boards to Medicaid management, child welfare, and other critical services.

Illinois, the state facing the largest budget deficit in proportion to its GDP, has contracted out its lottery;

California, Ohio, and New Jersey may follow suit. Connecticut and Texas have authorized widescale private contracts for infrastructure projects.

Utah, Arizona, California, and Hawaii are all considering privatizing vast state parks. State parks, historic battlefields and other public sites across the country are targeted for closure, and many have already closed gates to the public because of layoffs in park service staff.

In California alone, 70 state parks are scheduled to be closed. The state's park services agency has requested that it be allowed to hand over operations to private entities for five years. "In budget battles, parks are the perennial loser," Reason Foundation's "government reform" director Leonard Gilroy commented. "It strengthens the argument and says, 'hey, look, the alternative here is closure'."

Diabetes epidemic largely untreated in West Virginia coalfields

In Logan County, West Virginia, at least 6,000 residents have diabetes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). With a population of 36,700, that is a rate of nearly one in six—nearly double the national rate of 8.3 percent.

Poverty is the primary driver of the disease. The county is one of the poorest in the country, with a per capita income of \$14,000 and one in five residents below the official poverty line.

In addition to its deep economic distress, Logan County's mountainous geography and limited physical infrastructure make it difficult for many residents to get to a supermarket where they can obtain nutritious foods. This contributes significantly to rates of diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and other health problems. The region has the lowest life expectancy for women in the country, on par with the average female lifespan in Algeria. (See "The social crisis in the US and the 2012 elections")

Despite the epidemic levels of diabetes, the county has no public educational services to help residents learn how to treat or prevent the disease. "We have the highest rate of diabetes in the nation, but no diabetes education at all, as far as I know," Patricia Mullens, staff nurse at the county health department, told the *Charleston Gazette*.

Visiting diabetes educator Anise Nash told the paper

that elderly patients, young mothers, and coal miners ask her question after question on how to care for themselves. "I have never been anywhere where I've seen people so hungry for information about diabetes or so receptive to information," she said. "These are very genuine people, and they just soak up any information you give them." Nash added that the CDC's estimated count of Logan's diabetics underestimated the crisis. "And there are many more who don't know they have it."

"Almost everyone in Logan County knows of somebody who has lost a leg or gone blind," Nash said.

Washington state opens emergency fund to contain whooping cough

Washington Governor Christine Gregoire announced an emergency fund of \$90,000 last week for a public awareness campaign in the hopes of containing an outbreak of pertussis, or whooping cough.

So far this year, 20 infants have been hospitalized with the illness. The state intends to purchase 27,000 doses of whooping cough vaccine to be made available for uninsured patients.

Washington has recorded 1,132 cases so far this year—ten times more than the same time a year ago—although health officials caution that only about 10 percent of cases are typically reported. The state is recording more than 400 cases per month. This is four times the threshold that the state considers an "epidemic."

"In my 13 years as secretary, this is the first time I've had to use the word 'epidemic' about disease in our state," Secretary of Health Mary Selecky told the Associate Press. Recorded cases so far this year have already broken the state's previous annual record, of 1,020 in 2005.



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