Notes on the social crisis in America

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11 June 2012

Connecticut man says "desperate times," hunger drove robberies

A Bantam, Connecticut, man was arrested for a series of bank and gas station robberies in May, which he said were driven by "desperate times." The Litchfield County *Register Citizen* reported that 23-year-old Michael Schibi admitted to police that he had robbed $70 from a gas station, then headed to a bank with his 20-year-old girlfriend Delia Thornton.

Thornton "went into the bank to apply for a new account while Schibi went into the nearby woods to change into his robbing gear," the paper said. When Thornton walked out and he prepared to enter, Schibi told police, "She gave me a kiss and said this was probably the last time she was going to be able to do that."

Court documents paint a picture of desperation and remorse. Schibi approached a teller and said, "I really don't want to do this, but I need the money." The teller asked him how much he wanted, to which he said he "didn't know." When the teller gave him $450, Schibi apologized to her. He told police he had "no job, no money. I was desperate. I am hungry and needed to buy food. I am poor. I have nothing. I feel very hurt for the people I scared and am very remorseful."

Earlier that same day, Schibi had attempted to rob a convenience store but had an apparent failure of nerve. Walking into the store with a mask on, he saw two workers and "froze." The *Register Citizen* reported he then "removed his mask and asked when the coffee would be ready. When one worker said 'five minutes,' Schibi told police he left."

Man evicted from family home shot by police

A Missouri man facing foreclosure is accused of firing a shot in the direction of a police squadron assembled outside his family home Wednesday. According to St. Louis-based NBC station KSDK, the 51-year-old was distraught and holding a gun when he opened the door on St. Ann police serving him eviction papers.

After the man refused to leave and retreated into the house, police fired tear gas through a window. The man then reportedly fired a shot out of a window, and was shot by police. He remains hospitalized. Neighbors said the man grew up in the home and was facing financial difficulties.

Suffolk, Virginia, tenants evicted after slumlords jailed

Suffolk, Virginia, landlords Eric Menden and George Hranowskyj were jailed in April on fraud charges that contributed to the collapse of the regional Bank of the Commonwealth. A June 5 report by local NBC affiliate WAVY 10 news said of 75 Suffolk properties managed by the real estate developers, 20 are in egregious violation of city housing codes.

Tenants in these units have been abruptly served eviction notices by the city. "Joyce Porter and her seven family members say they suffer from those violations," WAVY reported. "The Porter family has lived without water for three months. That's one of several reasons an eviction notice and notice of home condemning is now posted on her door." The station noted that the household was living on a fixed income and consisted of children and elderly and disabled relatives.

"I've got to be out of here tomorrow. They are

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sending a contractor out here tomorrow to take possession of this house," Porter told the station. She had only three days to pack up and does not know where she and her family will go. "I'll be 52 on the 19th of this month," she said. "I feel like I'm 301 right now."

Expressing anger at both the slumlords and the city, Porter said, "Y'all been knowing this man was incarcerated. We didn't. It's not fair to the tenants that you're making us pay for him embezzling money…. Put me in a place. Put my family in a house that they can be safe and secure."

"I don't ask people for anything," Porter added. "I do stuff on my own, but now I'm asking, can someone please help me and my family and all the other families that need some help?"

City spokesperson Debbie George said the Department of Social Services could not place the Porters or others in homes. "You have places such as the homeless shelters, you have organizations that are willing to pay for hotel rooms and things like that," George said.

Low-wage workers suffer increasingly from "wage theft"

As low-wage and informal work has risen under the economic crisis, workers have been victimized by their employers through wage theft and threats of firing. "Millions of workers are losing pay, with the majority in low-income service industries such as fast food, domestic work, agriculture, retail, hotel and tourism and home health care," the McClatchy news service reports. As companies are attacking workers, "budget-cutting state and federal governments do not enforce wage laws as aggressively as they once did."

Jordan Bruxvoort of the Grand Rapids, Michigan, community justice organization Micah Center told McClatchy that wage theft was ubiquitous in low-wage sectors. "There wasn't a place that we went where we didn't find someone with a story," he said. "In this economy, there are some workers who are so desperate for a job that they will put up with a lot of violations of their rights. It's a natural human response to hold onto what you have even if it's not very good."

A recent study of the Houston, Texas, workforce found that workers lose more than $753 million a year. A survey of Chicago, Los Angeles and New York found nearly two out of three low-wage workers experienced some form of wage theft *each week*, and three out of four reported underpayment or non-payment of wages. On average, these workers lost $51 a week.

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