

# Notes on the social crisis in America

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## Utah ties welfare aid to drug testing

Following Florida, Oklahoma and at least 26 other states, Utah is set to implement a law that will penalize families of welfare applicants who refuse to take drug tests. House Bill 155, which goes into effect on August 1, will strip Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance from recipients who are either found to be using drugs or who refuse to be tested.

The state Department of Workforce Services (DWS) has proposed to prevent the recipient's entire family from receiving aid for three months on the first offense, and for a year on the second. DWS representative Geoffrey Landward told the *Salt Lake Tribune* that the rule was deliberately harsh. "That's the level that we chose hoping it would keep people motivated."

The political establishment has made clear its indifference toward the wholly anticipated outcome: rising child hunger, destitution, and homelessness. State Representative Brad Wilson, the bill's sponsor, described the law as "common sense." "We don't want kids to not have what they need, but it's primarily a parent's responsibility to care for their kids, not the government's," he said.

## Child abuse and neglect surges in San Antonio, Texas

Child abuse and neglect cases have increased by 10 percent so far this year in San Antonio's Bexar County, advocates report. The county had 5,915 confirmed cases of abused and neglected children in the last fiscal year, the highest in the state. Houston, which has three times as many children as San Antonio, recorded 5,493

cases.

As many as 22 Bexar County children have died from abuse or neglect in the last year. Most were related to medical or supervisory neglect, not abuse. Among aggravating factors in many cases, advocates have pointed to unemployed fathers acting as day care for their partners, or single mothers without help, and untreated mental illness. Lack of mental health services, a long waiting list for low-income day care, and an intractable jobs crisis have pushed the poorest families into desperate situations.

The Department of Protective and Regulatory Services has denied that the rising rates are a reflection of economic crisis and budget cutting. "Last year happened to be a bad year," Child Protective Services (CPS) spokesman Patrick Crimmins told the *San Antonio Express-News*. "There's no relation between the number of deaths in any given year and how CPS is performing."

While the total CPS budget is \$2.3 billion, only 1 percent of the funding is allotted to prevent abuse. The Texas legislature further slashed the abuse and neglect prevention budget by one third in its last session.

Judge Richard Garcia, who works in the Bexar County children's court, said the local CPS office was working very hard. "They're hustling. But other factors have brought things to a boiling point—people are frustrated, money is tight, they're running out of benefits, they have no jobs because of the economy and so they're home all day. They just explode, and unfortunately the kids are getting the worst of it."

Boys Town Texas director Janie Cook told the *Express-News*, "We know the longer the recession lasts, the more child abuse increases.... It's really scary."

## **Stress levels substantially higher since 1983**

In an analysis of three national surveys administered in 1983, 2006, and 2009, Carnegie Mellon University researchers have concluded that stress levels have risen substantially among the US population.

Measurements of psychological stress increased 18 percent for women and 24 percent for men over the two and a half decades. “In all three surveys, stress was higher among women than men; and increased with decreasing age, education, and income,” the study found. “Unemployed persons reported high levels of stress, while the retired reported low levels.”

The surveys used the Perceived Stress Scale, a measure the Carnegie Mellon team created in 1983, to assess the psychological stressfulness of various situations. The research is used to flesh out the relationship between stress, immunity, and disease.

In terms of stress, white, middle-aged men were found to have been most affected by the economic crisis, with an increase in stress nearly double that of any other demographic groups. Every group registered an increase of between 10 and 30 percent. The data, the study notes, “suggest greater stress-related health risks among women, younger adults, those of lower socioeconomic status, and men potentially subject to substantial losses of income and wealth.”

## **Woonsocket, Rhode Island, slides toward bankruptcy**

The Providence-area city of Woonsocket, Rhode Island, may be handed over to a receiver with the authority to declare bankruptcy after the state’s General Assembly adjourned without voting on a tax increase that would aid municipal budgets.

Woonsocket, population 42,000, has struggled under a \$10 million school budget deficit and other debts, as well as a deflating tax base due to the housing market collapse. Ratings agencies Moody’s and Fitch have downgraded the city’s bond ratings to below investment grade, making borrowing more difficult and costly.

The workforce of Central Falls, another Providence-area city, was subjected to deep cuts last year in order to meet debt obligations of the city’s bondholders after a receiver declared bankruptcy last August.

Pointing as an example to Providence, which avoided bankruptcy by brokering draconian pension and job cuts with its city unions, Woonsocket’s city council president John Ward declared, “Everything is negotiable.”

Providence struck a deal with city unions in May that is projected to claw back \$18 million a year. Cost-of-living adjustments for pensions are to be frozen for 10 years, and retirees over the age of 65 will be moved into Medicare. In all, the state capital has gutted more than \$100 million from its spending by ripping up contracts, shuttering schools, and terminating services.



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