

Notes on the social crisis in America

Naomi Spencer
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Washington, D.C. man killed by police

A scene that has been played out numerous times across the country in recent weeks was repeated on a residential Washington, D.C. street Friday, when a mentally unstable Southeast D.C. resident was killed in a hail of police bullets.

Police said 24-year-old Albert Jermaine Payton brandished a knife at them, and was shot after he failed to comply with an order to drop it. Witnesses to the shooting were outraged at the police account.

“That story they are telling is unbelievable,” one resident told the *Washington Post*. “They didn’t have any business shooting that many times.” Local television footage at the scene indicated “as many as 36 individual pieces of evidence [i.e., bullets or fragments] had been flagged.” The police department is conducting the investigation into its own conduct.

The witness said Payton was on the other side of the street when he paused. “He was nowhere near them.” The witness also said that Payton had dropped the knife. The young man had reportedly been in an argument with his girlfriend, and was grappling with “mental challenges.” “He had a good heart,” the witness said. “He really did.”

Child care costs half annual income for families in poverty

In 2011, the average annual cost of full-time child care for an infant ranged from \$4,600 in Mississippi to nearly \$15,000 in Massachusetts. The cost of keeping a toddler in child care ranged from \$3,900 to \$11,700. Before- and after-school care cost between \$1,950 and \$11,000.

Behind these figures, based on an extensive survey of providers by the advocacy organization Child Care Aware of America, stands the stark reality confronting millions of families subsisting on low wages. Nearly 11 million children under the age of five are in a child care setting for an

average of 35 hours each week.

In New York, deemed the most unaffordable state for single mothers, the cost of full-time infant care cost more than 54 percent of state median income for single mothers (\$25,852). Across all 50 states, the annual cost averaged 38 percent of state median incomes for single mothers, and infant care cost more than 51 percent of the poverty level for a family of three (\$18,530).

In every state in the country, the cost of day care for two children exceeds annual median rent payments. “For families with two young children in care at the same time,” the study states, “costs can be overwhelming and can dwarf most other items in the family budget.” The impossibility of meeting child care, transportation, and other work-related costs have compelled minimum wage workers to seek public assistance and second jobs.

Only 17 percent of families eligible for federal assistance with child care costs receive help, making day care more of a strain on family budgets than in-state tuition costs for college education. As a result, unlicensed day care and babysitting services have exploded as an informal sector of the economy. Out-of-work relatives and neighbors have taken on responsibilities to allow parents to work.

Two-thirds of unemployment compensation applicants turned away in Florida

Only one in three applicants for unemployment insurance receives any compensation in Florida, the state with the most restrictive benefits system in the country. Florida’s “reciprocity rate,” the proportion of jobless workers who receive benefits, is only 16 percent.

Some 800,000 Florida residents are currently unemployed. The average weekly unemployment check is only \$230. The maximum number of weeks has been reduced from 26 to 23.

Applicants must complete a 45-question “skills review” and an online-only form. Republican Governor Rick Scott defended the “skills review,” implemented in 2011 as part of

“Reemployment Assistance,” as an effort to make the population more work-ready. Applicants must also contact five employers every week.

The 2011 law was tied to an \$800 million cut to business taxes that previously funded unemployment benefits.

The direct outcome of the process is that hundreds of thousands of unemployed Floridians have been left without any income the moment they lose their jobs. Federal data indicated more than a quarter million other jobless residents have been dropped from the rolls after their 23 weeks ran out.

A hotline for the system plays an automated message declaring high call volumes before automatically disconnecting. On one occasion, a *Miami Herald* reporter was met by a recorded voice that said, “There are currently 399 calls in front of you.”

Raymond Togyer, 65, told the *Miami Herald* he was laid off for the first time in his life in June. “They told me that I was eligible and that I was getting \$275 a week,” he said. “That was seven weeks ago. To this day I have not received anything. I’m draining my savings to pay my bills.”

Georgia high school dropout rate twice previously reported

Documents obtained through an open records request by the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* reveal that 30,751 Georgia high school students left without diplomas in 2011. The number is nearly double the 15,590 reported by the state education department under a more lax methodology than new federal data standards. According to the *Journal Constitution*, “Under the state’s old formula, students who disappeared from a school’s rolls were often written off as transfers without evidence that they had landed in another school.”

The discrepancy translates into a graduation rate of only 67.4 percent, down from 80.9 percent. In other words, one in three Georgia high school students do not graduate.

In the metro-Atlanta Clayton County Public School district, the rate is far more extreme, with a 51.5 percent graduation rate, down from 80.2 percent under the state calculation. Atlanta Public Schools had a graduation rate of 52 percent, down from 69.5 percent.

The revelation highlights the pressure of local school districts to avoid being perceived as “failing” and face punishment under the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program. Districts in high poverty areas have been starved of funding and contend with lack of supplies,

hunger, homelessness, and other effects of economic and social deprivation on the student body.

Graduation rate inflation is common across the US; Atlanta, Detroit, and other impoverished urban school systems have been the focus of scrutiny. The exposures have been used as leverage in the drive to charterize and dismantle public education.

States burn through energy assistance funds during heat wave

Record heat over the summer compelled state utility assistance programs to expend much of their limited annual budgets for emergency cooling programs.

Illinois, crippled by one of the worst budget deficits in the country, used \$10 million from winter heating assistance to institute a three-week cooling program in July. While the program assisted 74,000 residents, an estimated 20,000 of the most vulnerable people will be left without heating help in the dead of winter. Wisconsin took similar measures to meet record demand for aid.

The jointly funded state-federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) has long been underfunded. Since the onset of the economic crisis, the program, along with other fundamental safety net provisions, has been slashed even as need rises. Currently LIHEAP is budgeted for \$3.4 billion, the same as in 2009, with no additional contingency funds in case of a weather disaster.

State programs are woefully inadequate. California projects it will reach only 10 percent of those eligible for help with their heating bills.



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