

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Washington, DC, public housing waiting list is decades long

Poor families who apply for housing assistance vouchers in Washington, DC, face a wait of years, if not decades. The capital's Housing Authority (DCHA) is considering closing the list for vouchers at a time when the housing crisis is most acute.

Currently, 66,297 families and individual applicants are waiting for help. Last year alone, nearly 11,000 new families applied. Nearly 50 percent of those on the list are homeless, according to DCHA data.

According to the *Washington Post*, the estimated wait time for a family signing up today for a modest two-bedroom apartment is "at least 22 years."

"Ironically," the paper commented, "smaller families experience longer waits; a studio apartment has an estimated wait of 43 years."

"I really need housing, and I believe that somebody will make a way for me and my family," said Ceola Lewis, a disabled grandmother who first applied for help 37 years ago. "All I can do is put my name on the list and hope that one day I'll get that letter in the mail."

Colorado child protection caseworkers "at the breaking point"

Child abuse caseworkers are "inexperienced and overwhelmed," a *Denver Post* investigation found. The situation has produced mistakes that may have contributed to the deaths of children in the state's system that were already found to have suffered from abuse or neglect. Seventy-two children whose families were in the child welfare system have died of abuse or neglect in the past six years.

A survey of more than 500 caseworkers found that 59

percent were suffering from "high or very high levels of 'compassion fatigue,' " causing burnout, high turnover, and poor performance. According to the *Post*, Colorado does not keep track of how many children each caseworker is assigned to manage, how much workers are paid, or how long they stay in their positions. Interviews found the "typical burnout is about four years."

The paper described the hellish conditions. "Amy Hinkle, an ambitious new college graduate, lasted one year. She earned \$28,000, worked 60-hour weeks and once returned from four days off to find her voicemail jammed with 99 messages."

"I just wanted to just crawl in a hole and die after a year," Hinkle, 23, told the *Post*.

"We gave them an unmanageable, thankless job," Skip Barber, executive director of the not-for-profit advocacy group Colorado Association of Family and Children's Agencies, told the paper. "If a caseworker makes a mistake, it's front-page news. The system was set up to fail."

Nationally, the average tenure of a child welfare worker is only two years.

Idaho inmates sue private prison for gang violence as cheap control method

Eight inmates of the Idaho Correctional Center filed a lawsuit against the for-profit Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), contending the company uses prison gangs as a cheap mechanism for controlling the population. The suit, filed November 9 in the US District Court in Boise, states that CCA "fosters and develops criminal gangs," which allows the company to use fewer guards, cutting payroll costs.

The preponderance of gangs like the Aryan Knights and the Severely Violent Criminals in the Idaho Correctional Center has meant that prison staff have to "negotiate the

placement of new inmates with gang leaders,” the Associated Press reported, “and that prison guards were afraid to enforce certain rules.”

Over the past decade, CCA has seen its nationwide inmate population boom by nearly 50 percent, as states sell off government-managed prisons to the private sector. Overcrowding, violence, and incidence of disease have spiraled upward in many facilities as a result.

Homeless camp dispersed at the edge of America’s most expensive real estate market

An encampment of three homeless men was ordered to disperse November 2 after their belongings and trash were discovered on an Aspen, Colorado, conservation easement. The men, all employed, were told they had to leave or face trespassing charges.

The *Aspen Daily News* reported that one of the men said “he has been in town for more than 20 years and used to work for a wealthy man who owned land nearby prior to it becoming the private Starwood enclave that is home to multimillion-dollar mansions.”

The men all work for a temp agency doing construction, but were unable to afford rent. Aspen is surrounded by at least 15 homeless camps, comprised of many “individuals who once had places of their own and jobs, but are down on their luck,” the paper stated.

Aspen is a popular vacation destination for celebrities and the ultra-rich. The influx of wealth, particularly in the past two decades, has driven real estate prices to the highest nationwide and pushed most workers out of the town.

The lowest-priced single-family home on the market in 2011 was a trailer selling for a staggering \$559,000. The median home price stands at more than \$4.2 million.

A survey conducted in August by local homeless advocates across the surrounding tri-county area found a high number of “at-risk” individuals who were “one crisis away—like a broken-down vehicle or an illness—from becoming homeless.” Among the homeless, “the resounding reasons they were homeless was because they couldn’t afford rent, the loss of a job or bad credit.”

People in poverty twice as likely to suffer depression

One in three Americans living in poverty have been diagnosed with depression, compared to 15.8 percent of those above the poverty line, a Gallup-Healthways poll found.

Cancer and high cholesterol diagnoses rates were 0.8 points lower for those in poverty, a result that points to lower rates of testing and routine medical care for the poor. The poll found adults living in poverty had more difficulty in attaining insurance, access to a physician, and other basic health necessities.

The far higher rate of depression diagnosis has led some researchers to speculate that the disorder is overdiagnosed because it is mistaken for the real pressures associated with poverty. “If you have a genuine problem that you can’t solve, that’s not actually an anxiety disorder,” Margaret Wehrenberg, Psy.D., told the *Atlantic*.

Judith Baer, Ph.D., of Rutgers University analyzed the correlation between poverty and anxiety disorder diagnoses among women and concluded that “anxiety seen in poor mothers is caused by poverty itself, not mental illness.” The *Atlantic* reported that Baer likened the claim that poor mothers are more likely to suffer anxiety disorder to “a therapist talking to someone behind the wheel and ignoring the high speeds and the trucks blaring past. Then concluding that there’s something wrong with them because they seem distressed.”

The 2011 Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, on which Baer’s analysis was based, identified poverty through its manifestation in life events including telephone service being disconnected, inability to pay rent or utility bills, accepting free food, having to move in with other people because of financial strain, and other dilemmas. All of these situations were pointed to as a potent source of anxiety and stress.



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