

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Out-of-work parents charged for transporting children in back of moving truck

In an incident with modern-day echoes of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a Pennsylvania couple was charged with child neglect after being pulled over in New Castle, Indiana, driving cross-country with five of their children stowed away in the back of a Budget moving truck. Two other children were squeezed into the cab with their parents. The children in the back were aged 9 to 18.

Owning no vehicle of their own, the family packed all of their possessions into the rental truck and headed toward California for a job opportunity.

Forty-one-year-old David Detjen had lost his job and was desperate for work. Detjen allegedly admitted to police that it “was kind of a stupid idea, but it was sort of a last resort.”

Detjen and his wife, Rebecca, 40, were arrested after an anonymous tip attributed to a relative. Indiana state trooper John Bowling said, “They were down on their luck for sure. They didn’t have a car. This was a last-ditch effort to follow up on a possible job in San Bernardino. But it still was an unwise decision. The dad has told investigators he knew it was a bad idea.”

Although there was no heat in the back of the truck, the children had sleeping bags, as well as cell phones in order to call their parents in the cab.

The parents were booked on suspicion of multiple felony counts of neglect. The children were turned over to child protective services. The Detjens are being held at the Henry County jail on \$5,000 bail.

Michigan mother burdened with deceased son’s student loans

Ella Edwards, 61, has been paying private companies

every month since 2009, when her son Jermaine died of natural causes at age 24. “American Education Services and National Collegiate Trust turned my son’s dream into a nightmare for me and the two-year-old son he left behind,” Edwards wrote in a petition demanding the companies change their policies. Her petition has garnered some 200,000 signatures in support of her cause.

“He was paying the loan bills when he died, but the balance is still over \$10,000, and if I’m ever a couple days late on a payment, the calls keep coming until I pay,” Edwards told ABC News. After her son’s death, she fell into a deep depression and could barely function from day to day. Now she is working, but does not make enough to cover the payments.

“I am 61 years old and I have been trying to work to make Jermaine’s loan payments,” she explained, “but I simply don’t have the money. To make matters worse, Jermaine left behind a young son whose mother doesn’t have many resources. Therefore, she relies on me to help support Jermaine’s son.”

“I suffer every day, and I started the petition because I don’t want any other mom to suffer like I am,” she told ABC News, fighting back tears. “People need to be aware these private loan people will come after you like a shark. I would advise people never to get a private loan until the law changes.”

Forty percent of homeless face deadly winter weather

Four in 10 homeless US citizens live in cars, abandoned buildings, or on the streets. While the official homeless rate has declined slightly from 2009, a higher proportion now find themselves outside of the shelter system. During the winter months, hundreds of thousands of homeless people are at risk of hypothermia.

A brief human interest story in *USA Today* took up the life of a Battle Creek, Michigan, resident who was living

in his car. "Phil Bell sleeps under three sleeping bags and two blankets in the back seat of his 1998 Buick." Parking in lighted lots at night for safety, Bell explained, "You can't leave the car running because it calls attention to you and burns too much gas," he explains. "Being in the car is better than being outside or in a tent, but it gets really cold."

"I'm lucky," he added. "At least I've got the car. Most people out here on the streets don't have anything."

Bell, 39, has been homeless since September. He was laid off by a Detroit auto parts producer and couldn't afford his rent.

Neil Donovan, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, told *USA Today* that freezing deaths were exceedingly common in the winter, though no government agency tracks hypothermia deaths. "The support system needs many, many more coats than the number of people who are homeless," he said. "We really need to hold cities accountable for how they manage the hypothermia crisis."

Study shows long-term educational impact of youth homelessness

Students who were homeless or "high mobility" had "chronically low levels of reading and math achievement compared to their peers—gaps that either stayed the same or worsened as students approached high school," even after the period of transience has ended, a new longitudinal study by the University of Minnesota and Minneapolis Public Schools found.

The study tracked nearly 26,500 Minneapolis students from third through eighth grade. Fourteen percent of those children experienced homelessness or unstable living situations. Children were considered highly mobile if they moved more than three times in a school year.

"The results are disheartening, but confirm what we previously suspected," co-author Elizabeth Hinz said in a press release. The full findings were published October 30 in the journal *Child Development*.

More than one million school children in the US are homeless or highly mobile each year, according to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth.

Sinkhole eats Ohio state road

A 200-foot-long sinkhole appeared so suddenly on State Route 516 Wednesday that workers at a site nearby had to run away and alert drivers to the danger. The hole measured more than 30 feet deep, and quickly grew to engulf several acres near the town of Dover.

Ohio Department of Transportation officials said the sinkhole was caused by a dredging machine at a nearby sand and gravel pit. Newton Asphalt Paving, the company responsible for the sinkhole, has dredged the land nearly 50 feet below the surface. Department of Transportation District 11 Director Lloyd McAdam told the local media, "It appears to me that dredging took away the bottom of the slope, and that probably eroded away and started cascading down, and just started filling the hole and filling the hole."

The road has been closed indefinitely. Officials have said repairs could not begin until "well into 2013."

Ohio's infrastructure is crumbling. The American Society of Civil Engineers rates one quarter of the state's roads in poor or mediocre condition. Vehicle traffic has increased by 27 percent over the last two decades, leading to high levels of congestion and heavy wear and tear.

The extensive extraction industry has not only weakened the areas around roadways but has degraded the roads themselves with heavy equipment, especially loaded dump trucks. The state's drinking water is also heavily polluted; Ohio ranks fifth in the nation in hazardous wastewater. The state currently has more than \$11 billion in unmet wastewater infrastructure needs.



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