

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Facing eviction, Azusa, California siblings commit suicide

Confronted with the foreclosure of their family home, three Azusa, California siblings committed suicide December 6. Three members of the Alva family—47-year-old Christine, 49-year-old Barbara, and their 59-year-old brother, George—were found dead in the burned remnants of their home on the day they were to be evicted. Upon responding to a neighbor's emergency call, firefighters found numerous guns and ammunition; the family pets were also found dead.

The Los Angeles County Coroner's office determined that all had died of self-inflicted gunshot wounds to the head. Officials stated that the three had apparently entered into a suicide pact after the deaths of their parents. The siblings had reportedly spent the past several years caring for their ailing father and mother.

Friends and relatives told the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* that the family had fallen on hard times. Nola Dewester, a friend of Barbara Alva, said, "I just talked to her in October. I knew she was having problems." "They were wonderful people," Dewester commented. "They just welcomed you into their lives."

Barbara had conveyed worry over losing their home after it went into foreclosure in June, but Dewester said, "She didn't want to let me know what's going on." The home had been in the family for more than 60 years. Now, court records list real estate developer MPH Property of Los Angeles as the owner.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, none of the siblings were working full time, and the three shared one car.

The Alvas are survived by three other siblings, Art Alva, Dolores Castrajon, and Ana Wagner. Wagner told the *Tribune*, "We knew George, Barbie and Chris as generous, loving people. We are certain they meant no harm to anyone else, but had to find peace their own way. Most of all, we loved them. Their lives mattered."

Columbus, Ohio police disperse subsidized housing applicants with pepper spray

After a "larger-than-expected crowd" assembled to apply for the Columbus, Ohio subsidized housing waiting list December 8, city police were called in to disperse them with pepper spray.

The *Columbus Dispatch* reported that more than 1,000 residents, "mostly local Somalis," sought to apply to a list of two-bedroom apartment openings. Other local news outlets put the number at

2,000.

Columbus is home to the second-largest Somali immigrant community in the United States. Many live in cramped apartments with extended families and work at extremely low-wage jobs. The city has a higher-than-average renter population (one-in-two, compared to one-in-three nationally), and the pricing of apartments is heavily influenced by Ohio State University, one of the largest universities in the country, which is located in Columbus. As a result, the one-in-five residents who live in poverty struggle to pay for housing (see, "Ohio's hidden housing crisis") or subsist in overcrowded, dangerous conditions (see, "House fire caused by space heater kills three in Ohio").

The housing event, sponsored by Heritage apartments, was held at the Mount Hermon Missionary Baptist Church on the city's northeast side. A sign on the church door said the sign-up was for a "pre-application" process and that only the first 200 people would be considered.

The newspaper, citing police call logs, reported that neighbors of the church complained of the noise and illegal parking at 6:30 a.m., when applicants began lining up in hopes of getting in ahead of the rush. Some in the line became impatient and angry as they waited and no housing representatives appeared.

"Eventually," the *Dispatch* stated, "someone from Heritage arrived to set up for the event, and police records indicate that the crowd then rushed the doors. That's when police officers used chemicals to control the crowd. The event was canceled." Ambulances were called in to treat those doused with pepper spray; no arrests were made.

West Virginia newspaper features "neediest cases" series

In advance of the holiday season, the Charleston Daily Mail has published a series of "The Neediest Cases," profiling poor West Virginians it deems most deserving of charity out of a pool submitted by state social service caseworkers from 15 agencies. "Each agency limits its requests to no more than 50 cases each year," the Daily Mail states. Readers are told to vote for the stories they consider most "needy" by sending donations to the paper's office.

The result is Dickensian. "Told recently that Neediest Cases might be able to help purchase beds for her children, one mom wept," the paper reports. "Simply for help with beds."

"There's a West Virginia mom who would love to have an extra

\$425 this season,” the paper states. “It would just about pay for a new set of dentures that would help her become more employable. The set she has—and keep in mind she is just 35—is many years old and worn out.”

Among the cases featured: “Husband in need of glasses makes wife his priority;” “Big sister needs help raising four young siblings;” “Mentally ill woman forced from home, abandoned by all;” “Family has been living without electricity since June windstorm;” “Devoted single dad can’t afford household needs.” The list goes on.

The articles, written to persuade a skeptical reader that the individuals featured are not looking for a hand-out, underline the enormity of the social crisis in Appalachia.

“Neediest Case No. 17: Unemployed mom forced to share bed with her two kids,” quotes the caseworker of a 24-year-old mother of two small children, surviving only on food stamps, who has no family and no car. “She’s having a pretty hard time, and she’s a happy person but she seems kind of sad about everything,” the caseworker states.

“She doesn’t like not being able to go where she needs to go and having to ask for transportation. She feels bad asking for help. She’s trying really, really hard. She cried when I told her I was going to try to get her some help.”

“Downward mobility” threatens education prospects in US

Pew Research Group compared educational outcomes in ten industrialized countries, finding that the US had the strongest link between family wealth and educational success, and the lowest mobility. Diana Elliott, a manager of the study, commented to the BBC that “income has a pervasive hold on mobility.” The expectation that the next generation would do better than its predecessor has been undermined.

One in five young adults in the US is now “downwardly mobile” in educational terms, the Pew findings suggest. Andreas Schleicher, special adviser on education at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, told the BBC that the soaring cost of college education was one component of the cause, but added that the socio-economic background of students affected children from a young age. “If you lose the confidence in the idea that effort and investment in education can change life chances, it’s a really serious issue,” Schleicher said.

“The American dream has stalled,” declares a report tracking similar trends by the American Association of Community Colleges. “A child born poor in the United States today is more likely to remain poor than at any time in our history. Many other nations now outperform us in educational attainment and economic mobility, and the American middle class shrinks before our eyes.”

Hospice care budget eyed for elimination in Louisiana

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal announced \$166 million in proposed midyear budget cuts December 14. Hospice care for non-nursing home patients is among the targets.

Hospice patients will still receive medication through Medicaid, State Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Bruce Greenstein said, but patients would be dependent upon the help of non-profits and religious organizations to provide end-of-life care rather than qualified, state-paid nurses and doctors.

Greenstein said that the cut will be effective February 1.

“Doctors, hospitals, mentally ill patients, pregnant women and dying patients will be affected by the state’s financial problems,” reports the Baton Rouge Advocate, with the deepest reductions coming from DHH and the state Department of Children and Family Services.

Reductions include lower reimbursements for health care providers to the poor, mentally ill and drug-addicted; the elimination of dental benefits for poor pregnant women; layoffs in the state workforce; the ending of mental health treatment for some children. Domestic violence victims may be moved into hotels or be sheltered by their relatives to cut the state’s residential care costs.

Louisiana Hospital Association President John Matessino told the Advocate that the continuous cuts were pushing health care providers to the breaking point. “At some point they are going to start breaking down. Hospital margins are getting smaller and smaller.” Hospitals were receiving \$100 a day less in reimbursements in 2012 than they were in 1995, Matessino said. “We can’t keep on.”

Higher education funding is being cut by \$22 million, a reduction legislators have said will be offset by higher tuition. Since 2008, the state has cut nearly \$220 million from higher education.

The budget cuts are the fifth mid-year reductions in Louisiana in five years.



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