

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Harrowing struggle to survive for homeless in cold snap

Across the US, local news outlets carry tales of tragedy for the thousands of homeless people living in the elements. Freezing deaths, frost bite, and overcrowded shelters have been reported from California to Maine. No government agency tracks hypothermia deaths among the homeless.

In Baltimore, at least 11 people have died of hypothermia since the New Year, according to Russ Snyder, president of Volunteers of America Chesapeake. A Maryland City woman drowned Thursday morning after the homeless camp where she was living flooded. Survivors of the flood were treated for hypothermia.

Last week at least four people were killed from exposure to the cold across the upper Midwest, where wind chill temperatures dropped to as low as -50 degrees Fahrenheit. Detroit radio WWJ 950 reported busy hospital emergency rooms treating cases of hypothermia and frostbite.

“It’s a sad situation, but there are people dying of exposure from just being homeless,” Daniel Goff, a San Luis Obispo, California homeless man told the local ABC News affiliate. Three of his friends froze to death after they were turned away from the city’s shelter.

“It was just freezing, and they had to turn us away at 4 Sunday night, and said sorry we can’t afford to have it open, we don’t have the funding to have anybody watch it, so everybody walked out and froze that night,” Goff explained.

In Seattle, Washington two homeless people died last week, one of them confirmed as cold-related.

Four in 10 homeless people in the US live in cars, abandoned buildings, or on the streets. While the official count of the homeless population declined slightly from 2009, a higher proportion of the homeless are now surviving outside of the shelter system, a situation that places hundreds of thousands of people at risk of weather-related illness, injury, and death.

Unpaid Kalamazoo, Michigan community college

teachers open food bank

The teachers’ union representing part-time faculty at Kalamazoo Valley Community College in western Michigan opened a food bank January 11 to cope with hunger and lack of pay until February 1. The KVCC Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers in Michigan, represents some 300 part-time instructors who went unpaid for most of January.

The situation is an indictment of the union, which has been instrumental in creating a pool of impoverished and desperate workers. “We have a number of single moms trying to support kids,” Kelly O’Leary, co-president of the union, commented to *Inside Higher Ed*. “I don’t think people understand that they’re below poverty wages.”

Catherine Barnard, the union’s other co-president, added, “We’ve had part-time faculty coming out of the woodwork saying, ‘I’m a diabetic and I need to buy insulin’... At first, we didn’t even think about medication, but many of these people don’t have benefits.”

Kalamazoo Valley pays part-time faculty \$2,400 per course, on a semester-by-semester basis. The union estimated that most part-time teachers teach two or three classes each semester, earning less than \$15,000.

Madison, Wisconsin bank robber sought prison to escape student debt

When 49-year-old Randall H. Hubatch was arrested for robbing the Madison, Wisconsin Summit Credit Union January 11, he allegedly told police, “If the district attorney agrees to send me to prison for a long time, then I will confess and plead guilty.”

“Otherwise,” Hubatch added, “I have nothing else to say, and if released I will do it again.”

Surveillance camera footage from the bank appears to show Hubatch wearing a conspicuous “Bucky Badger” hat.

He was still wearing the hat at the time of his arrest.

Hubatch allegedly told police that he had a mild form of autism as well as diabetes, and that he was unable to afford his prescription medicine.

The *Wisconsin State Journal* reported that Hubatch had only a “plastic Star Wars toy gun in his pocket.” He handed the teller a note demanding \$500, telling him not to stall “because he didn’t want to hurt anyone. He also wrote that he would shoot anyone who followed him to his car.” Hubatch reportedly told police that this was “to throw people off” because he had no car.

According to the *State Journal*, Hubatch was working at University of Wisconsin-Madison as a custodian. He earned a bachelor’s degree in English in 1998, and a law degree in 2004. He allegedly told police that he had \$250,000 in student loans.

“He asked for \$500 because he thought Summit would not care about \$500 and would simply give it to him,” the paper reported.

Washington DC train commuters stranded for hours after equipment malfunction

A malfunction of electrical equipment left 2,000 train riders stranded for more than two hours on the DC Metro’s Green Line January 30. It is the second such incident on Metro lines in a week. On Sunday, riders were stranded on the Orange Line for two hours after a power outage.

The second busiest urban rail system in the US, the Metro is notorious for being underfunded and ill-maintained. In 2009, a head-on collision killed nine passengers and workers and injured scores more.

Fire officials said the incident Wednesday was triggered by a small fire involving an “arcing insulator,” a part of the track that keeps the electricity on the third rail separate from the other parts. It is likely that a bolt or other component had come loose, transit experts told the *Washington Post*.

While shutting off power to deal with the fire, the *Post* reported, an emergency responder accidentally shut down power to a large section of track, stranding two trains.

Passengers on one of the trains began evacuating by themselves, trying to make their way to the station, but found the second train in front of them. Officials said this was a dangerous situation given that electricity on one of the tracks was still live.

There were several medical emergencies aboard the trains, which passengers said were crowded, hot, and dark. Fire officials told the *Post* that three people were taken to

hospitals, with one listed in serious condition. One woman suffered a seizure aboard the train.

“No safety procedures were given,” said one commuter. “People start panicking when they don’t hear anything for two to three hours. Metro can do better.” Another rider told the *Post* she assisted another passenger who had an asthma attack. No medical aid was offered to the riders, she said. “They didn’t offer us anything, any water to drink.”

“And they keep trying to raise fares,” another passenger commented. “I’ve been waiting on a train for two hours, and they say I can’t use the bathroom. Are you serious? I’m still holding my bladder.”

“Underground dentistry” on the rise

Jose Santiago Delao, arrested January 24 in Dallas, Texas, expressed no remorse for practicing dentistry without a license at his home. Delao, a former dental lab technician with 27 years’ experience, saw customers who were uninsured and undocumented citizens.

“Jesus Christ didn’t need or didn’t have a license,” he told a Yahoo News interviewer at the Plano jail where he is being held. “People hurt and they needed it. People didn’t have enough money to visit the regular dentist. ... It broke my heart, because I have the experience.”

“I helped undocumented people, single mothers and uninsured people,” he said. He charged \$50 for what might cost upwards of \$250 elsewhere. “Only enough to pay my bills,” he said.

According to Yahoo News, as many as eight “underground” clinics have been shut down by police since last summer. “People have extremely serious and unmet needs for oral health care,” Julia Paradise, associate director at the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, stated.

A Kaiser analysis found that the number of adults without dental coverage is three times the number of those without general health coverage, and one in three children under private health plans are uninsured for dental care.

More than one in five low-income adults have not seen a dentist in five years or more. One in three adults admit they skip needed dental checkups and care because of the cost.



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