

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Thousands line up for medical care in South Carolina

Thousands of South Carolina residents turned out for a free health clinic held in Columbia August 4-6. The clinic offered basic medical, dental and optical services for the poor and uninsured.

Residents began lining up early in the morning last Thursday and many who failed to be treated that day spent the night sleeping in place to ensure they would be seen on Friday. Local media reported that by early Thursday morning a line of several thousand had built up beyond the cordoned off area around the city's coliseum. The line extended into and out of a nearby tunnel and back around the entire coliseum.

Requests for dental services were so great that a team of dentists and support staff worked in shifts through the night. Optometrists worked until 2am.

By Friday afternoon organizers of the event had to halt dental services, turning away at least 1,000 people. The announcement provoked anger and frustration among the crowd, most of whom had spent hours waiting in 104-degree heat and extreme humidity. Many more had joined the line before dawn on Saturday. Providers had to close the doors two hours earlier than scheduled that afternoon after supplies were again exhausted.

Need for dental care is particularly high among poor adults after the South Carolina Medicaid program eliminated coverage for emergency tooth extractions. High unemployment and low insurance coverage have left a large segment of the working class with no access to affordable dental care.

Chicago ending overnight homeless services

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a Democrat and former chief of staff to President Obama, is eliminating overnight

emergency services for the homeless. The city's Department of Family and Support Services will lay off 24 employees in response to a halving of state funding. Most of the employees being cut help homeless residents find shelter between midnight and 8am.

The cut is part of reductions affecting a wide range of city services. Emanuel recently announced that 625 city workers will be fired and their services privatized. The mayor also plans to eliminate some 100 traffic control aide positions.

Youth unemployment at 49 percent in Washington, DC

Nearly one half of teens aged 16 to 19 in the nation's capital are unemployed, according to data from the pro-business Employment Policies Institute. Nationwide, one in four teenagers is out of work.

"The risk is that if [teenagers] miss out on [the summer job experience], they become part of this lost generation of teens who never had a chance to get a foothold to take that first step on that career ladder," Michael Saltsman, research fellow at the Employment Policies Institute commented to National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" program on August 9.

Youth throughout the country face bleak job prospects, poor wages and lack of job stability. Officially, more than one in three teens are unemployed in California, Washington State, and Georgia. Census Bureau data indicate that some 40 percent of minimum wage workers are teenagers.

The lack of openings and the inadequacy of state-funded summer jobs programs force many teens into informal work. Rising numbers of teens have turned to the agricultural sector, where federal employment laws are lax and hazards are high. In the past month, several farming accidents have claimed the lives of teens in the

Midwest, including two 14-year-old Chicago-area girls who were electrocuted July 25 while detasseling corn for Monsanto Corp. Two others were seriously injured in the accident.

Children as young as 12 are legally eligible for employment in agriculture in the US.

Philadelphia imposes youth curfew to prevent “flash mobs”

Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter announced Monday a curfew of 9pm on Friday and Saturday nights for any resident under the age of 18. The curfew affects the Center City and University City neighborhoods, where youth have congregated in “flash mobs” organized via social networking tools and text messaging. “If you want to act like an idiot—move,” Nutter said, saying that parents of youth caught outdoors past curfew would be fined \$500 or charged with child neglect.

Instances of violence, looting and vandalism committed by large groups of mostly young people have been on the rise in the US over the summer. On June 23, a group convened in the Upper Darby suburb of Philadelphia and looted a Sears store. In the Shaker Heights neighborhood of Cleveland a July 4 event ended in a brawl after 1,000 teenagers responded to a flash-mob text message.

University students hit with higher fees

Georgia university students, already facing an average tuition increase of 3 percent and cuts to merit scholarships that especially benefit the poor, will see fee increases averaging 9 percent. A new “special institutional fee” will push up annual costs for public university students by over \$1,000 at some schools. Freshmen at Georgia Tech will see total fees rise to \$2,370.

Students across the country confront higher school costs and fewer options for payment. Universities are not required to explain fee increases, which are often imposed on students as a way to avoid violating state caps on tuition increases. Indiana University-Bloomington is tacking on a “temporary repair and maintenance fee” of \$180, scheduled to double next year.

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale has instituted a \$150 “matriculation fee.” Hundreds of SIUC students will also bear higher housing costs after the city ordered seven privately managed student apartment complexes and dorms immediately vacated August 9. Numerous buildings remain in an unsafe condition after being damaged in high-wind storms in May 2009.

Three months on, tornado-stricken Alabama residents struggle with rebuilding

August 4 marked 100 days since tornadoes tore through Alabama on April 27, killing 247 people and destroying communities. The Alabama Emergency Management Agency estimates that 92 percent of some 10 million cubic yards of debris have been cleared. In the city of Tuscaloosa, about 70 percent of the debris has been removed. It will take another three to four months to remove the remainder, Mayor Walt Maddox told the *Tuscaloosa News*. Reconstruction in the city will take an estimated six years.

Most of the 88,000 households that applied for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) rebuilding grants have seen no aid. FEMA data indicates that only 18 percent of applicants have been approved for small grants. In late July, the last FEMA shelters were shut down.

In the hard-hit town of Cordova, population 2,000, Mayor Jack Scott continues to refuse to allow residents to use FEMA trailers. Scott has said that the trailers would drag down property values and become permanent features in the devastated communities. Residents have circulated a petition to have him removed from office. Recovery planning meetings in the town have drawn hundreds of people.



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