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Governments Go to Extremes as the Downturn Wears On

By **MICHAEL COOPER**

Plenty of businesses and governments furloughed workers this year, but Hawaii went further — it furloughed its schoolchildren. Public schools across the state closed on 17 Fridays during the past school year to save money, giving students the shortest academic year in the nation and sending working parents scrambling to find care for them.

Many transit systems have cut service to make ends meet, but Clayton County, Ga., a suburb of Atlanta, decided to cut all the way, and shut down its entire public bus system. Its last buses ran on March 31, stranding 8,400 daily riders.

Even public safety has not been immune to the budget ax. In Colorado Springs, the downturn will be remembered, quite literally, as a dark age: the city switched off a third of its 24,512 streetlights to save money on electricity, while trimming its police force and auctioning off its police helicopters.

Faced with the steepest and longest decline in [tax collections](#) on record, state, county and city governments have resorted to major life-changing cuts in core services like education, transportation and public safety that, not too long ago, would have been unthinkable. And services in many areas could get worse before they get better.

The length of the downturn means that many places have used up all their budget gimmicks, cut services, raised taxes, spent their stimulus money — and [remained in the hole](#). Even with Congress set to approve extra stimulus aid, some analysts say states are still facing [huge shortfalls](#).

Cities and states are notorious for crying wolf around budget time, and for issuing dire warnings about draconian cuts that never seem to materialize. But the Great Recession has been different. Around the country, there have already been drastic cuts in core services like education, transportation and public safety, and there are [likely to be more](#) before the

downturn ends. The cuts that have disrupted lives in Hawaii, Georgia and Colorado may be extreme, but they reflect the kinds of cuts being made nationwide, disrupting the lives of millions of people in ways large and small.

EDUCATION: HAWAII FURLOUGHS ITS CHILDREN

MILILANI, Hawaii — It was a Friday, and Maria Marte, an administrator for an online college that caters to members of the military, should have been at her office at a nearby Army hospital. Her daughters, Nira, 11, and Sonia, 9, should have been in school.

Instead, Ms. Marte was sitting with a laptop in the dining room of her home in this neatly manicured suburb of Honolulu. “Did you already send your registration in?” she asked a client on the phone, trying to speak above the peals of laughter coming from the backyard, where the girls were having a water-balloon fight with some friends.

It was the 17th, and last, Furlough Friday of the year, the end of a cost-cutting experiment that closed schools across the state, outraging parents and throwing a wrench into that most delicate of balances for families with children: the weekly routine

“I have to pay attention to the customers, and make sure that I’m understanding what they need,” said Ms. Marte, 37, whose husband, Odalis, an Army major, had been deployed in Afghanistan for nearly a year. Then she nodded at the window, toward the girls. “But at the same time, I have to make sure that they’re not killing each other.”

For those 17 Fridays, parents reluctantly worked from home or used up vacation and sick days. Others enlisted the help of grandparents. Many paid \$25 to \$50 per child each week for the new child care programs that had sprung up.

Children, meanwhile, adjusted to a new reality of T.G.I.T. Getting them up for school on Mondays grew harder. Fridays were filled with trips to pools and beaches, hours of television and Wii, long stretches alone for older children, and, occasionally, successful attempts to get them to do their homework early.

But if three-day-weekends in Hawaii sound appealing in theory, many children said that they wound up missing school.

“I’m really not a big fan of furloughs,” said Nira Marte, a fifth grader, explaining that she missed the time with her friends and her teacher.

Four-day weeks have been used by a small number of rural school districts in the United States, especially since the oil shortage of the 1970s. During the current downturn, their ranks have

swelled to more than 120 districts, and more are [weighing the change](#).

But Hawaii is an extreme case. It shut schools not only in rural areas but also in high-rise neighborhoods in Honolulu. Suffering from steep declines in tourism and construction, and owing billions of dollars to a pension system that has only [68.8 percent](#) of the money it needs to cover its promises to state workers, Hawaii instituted the furloughs even after getting \$110 million in [stimulus money](#) for schools.

Unlike most districts with four-day weeks, Hawaii did not lengthen the hours of its remaining school days: its 163-day school year was the shortest in the nation.

The furloughs were originally supposed to last two years, but the outcry was so great — some parents were arrested staging sit-ins at the office of Gov. [Linda Lingle](#), a Republican — that a deal was hammered out to restore the days next year.

On the last furlough day, Ms. Marte toggled back and forth between her girls — making them pizza, taking them to swim practice — and a stream of e-mails and calls. At one point, a soldier on the mainland was interrupted when his baby started bawling.

“Don’t worry, that’s fine,” Ms. Marte reassured him. “I’m in the same boat.”

TRANSPORTATION: A COUNTY SHUTS ITS BUS SYSTEM

RIVERDALE, Ga. — Kelly Smith was reading a library copy of “The Politician,” the tell-all about [John Edwards](#), as his public bus rumbled through a suburb of Atlanta. It was heading toward the airport, where he could switch to a train to his job downtown, in the finance department of the Atlanta Public Schools system. But his mind was drifting.

It was March 31, the last day of public bus service. Clayton County had decided to balance its budget by shutting down C-Tran, the bus system, stranding 8,400 daily riders. Mr. Smith, 45, like two-thirds of the riders, had no car. He needed a plan.

“I think that what they’re doing is criminal,” Mr. Smith said as his 504 bus filled up. “I’ll figure something out, but I see a lot of people here who don’t have an out.”

The next morning, this is what he had figured out: a state-run express bus stopped around three miles from his apartment in Riverdale. So Mr. Smith rose at 5, walked past the defunct C-Tran bus stop just outside his apartment complex and hiked the miles of dark, deserted streets, many of which had no sidewalks.

“If I get hit by a car, it’s my fault,” he said as he crossed a highway. “Who wants to start their

day off like this? This is why I don't get up and jog.”

Mr. Smith was determined to get to the job he had landed in November, and to get there on time. “I was out of work for two and half years, with the economic crisis,” he said. “So the last thing I want to do is walk away from a job.”

Around the country, public transportation has taken a **beating** during the downturn. Fares typically cover less than half the cost of each ride, and the state and local taxes that most systems depend on have been plummeting.

In most places, that has meant longer waits for more crowded, dirtier and more expensive trains and buses. But it meant the end of the line in Clayton County, a struggling suburb south of Atlanta where “Gone With the Wind” was set and which is now home to most of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

The county — hit hard by the subprime mortgage crisis and the wave of foreclosures that followed — decided it could no longer afford spending roughly \$8 million a year on its bus system, which started in 2001. It hoped that some other entity — like the state — would pick up the cost.

If the threat to shut the system down was a game of chicken, no one blinked.

Now all five bus routes are gone, and riders are trying to adjust.

Jennifer McDaniel, a hostess at a Chili's in the airport, was forced to spend her tax refund, and take out a big loan, to buy a car. Jaime Tejada, 36, a Delta flight attendant, wondered why transit was so much better in the countries he flies to.

And Tierra Clark, 19, who studies dental hygiene and works five nights a week at the Au Bon Pain at the airport, was left with an unwanted new expense. “I'll have to call a taxi from now on — \$13.75 every night,” Ms. Clark said, as she rode the very last C-Tran bus home.

Now there is talk of levying a new sales tax so the county can join the **Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority**, which it voted not to join when it was created nearly four decades ago. That could get the buses up and running again.

Even if that happens, though, it could be years off — too late for Mr. Smith. After spending a carless Easter vacation trying to figure out a better way to get to work, or even to get his groceries, he ended up quitting his first job in two and a half years and moving just outside Dallas, where his girlfriend had landed a job with a bank.

“A lot of people are leaving Riverdale,” he said.

PUBLIC SAFETY: LIGHTS OUT IN COLORADO SPRINGS

COLORADO SPRINGS — It was when the street lights went out, Diane Cunningham said, that the trouble started.

Her tires were slashed, she said. Her car was broken into. Strange men showed up on her porch. Her neighborhood had grown deserted at night, ever since four streetlights in a row were put out on Airport Road, the street outside her mobile home park.

That is why Ms. Cunningham, 41, and her son Jonathan, 22, were carrying a flat-screen television out of their mobile home on a recent afternoon. “I’m going to pawn this,” Ms. Cunningham said, “to get a shotgun.”

It is impossible to say whether the darkness had contributed to any of the events that frightened the Cunninghams. But ever since Colorado Springs shut off a third of its 24,512 streetlights this winter to save **\$1.2 million** on electricity — while reducing the size of its police force — many residents have said that they feel less safe.

A few miles down Airport Road a 62-year-old man, Esteban Garcia, was shot to death in April when he was robbed outside his family’s taqueria and grocery in a parking lot that had lost the illumination of its nearest streetlight. Gaspar Martinez, a neighboring shopkeeper, said that he believed the lack of the light was partly to blame.

“You figure the robbers think that if it’s dark, it’s the best time to hit,” said Mr. Martinez, 34, whose store, Ruskin Liquor, is in the same small strip mall. Mr. Martinez said that he put more lights up outside his store after the shooting.

The police, who arrested several suspects, said that there was no indication that the doused light had played a role in the crime — or, indeed, in any crimes in Colorado Springs, which remains safer than most cities of its size. But this might be a case, they said, where perception is as important as reality.

“All the sociologists have said this for years: what matters to people isn’t really the number of reported crimes, it’s their perception of safety,” said the city’s police chief, Richard W. Myers. “And let’s say we don’t see any bump in crime — that would be a good thing. But people don’t feel as safe. They’re already telling us that, even if the numbers don’t bear that out. So do we have a problem? I think so.”

Chief Myers said he worried that if law-abiding citizens stopped going out at night or visiting

parks, the city's deserted open spaces could attract more criminals.

One of most influential policing concepts in recent years has been the "broken windows" theory, which holds that addressing minor crimes and signs of disorder can head off bigger problems down the road. Colorado Springs is taking a different tack.

To close a budget gap — the city's voters, many of whom favor smaller government, turned down a property tax increase in November, and a taxpayer's bill of rights makes it hard for city officials to raise taxes — Colorado Springs has stopped collecting trash in its parks, stopped watering many medians on its roads and reduced its police force.

The sprawling city of roughly 400,000 at the foot of [Pike's Peak](#) — which covers 194 square miles — made national news when it auctioned off its police helicopters. But less-heralded police cuts could have more impact: the force, which had 687 officers two years ago, is down to 643 and dropping. At any given time, the department estimates that there is a 23 percent chance that all units will be busy.

So it has reduced the number of detectives who investigate property crimes, cut the number of officers assigned to the schools and eliminated units that tracked juvenile offenders and caught fugitives. Officers no longer respond to the scene of most burglaries, at least if they are not in progress.

At the same time, the city joined others — from [Fitchburg, Mass.](#), to [Santa Rosa, Calif.](#), and began turning off streetlights. Several recent [studies](#) have suggested that streetlights help reduce crime — something residents here say is obvious.

Natalie Bartling, a new mother, could not believe it when the light outside her home was shut off in April. Ms. Bartling, 38, had successfully lobbied for the light five years ago after a wave of vandalism and petty thefts hit her middle-class block. So this time she called daily until the city agreed to turn it back on.

"When it got shut off, it was like missing something," she said on a recent night, standing under its glow. "Part of your life."