

# Opinion: Putting a price tag on life

By Eli Cook

Everything, as they say in America, has its price: It has been found that a lack of sleep costs the American economy \$411 billion a year and stress another \$300 billion. Countless other studies have calculated the annual cost of pain (\$560 million), heart disease (\$309 billion), cancer (\$243 billion), and diabetes (\$188 billion). Surf the web at work sometimes? That costs the American people \$63 billion a year. Did you show up hungover as well? Tack on another \$77 billion.

And while you may not know it, the American government has long put a price tag on Americans themselves. The Obama administration pegged the value of the average American life at \$9.1 million. That was up from \$6.8 million under the Bush administration.

Americans have developed the penchant for measuring nearly every aspect of their lives in dollars and cents, a process of seeing humans as assets that is so deeply ingrained in American life and decision-making that it constitutes a national philosophy.

Consider the price tags that Americans place on nature. According to "willingness to pay" surveys, dog owners will shell out \$7,000 more than cat owners to save their pets, while Americans would pay \$257 to save the bald eagle from extinction and \$208 to save the humpback whale. (That may sound noble but should be compared to the survey finding that Americans would pay \$225 to drop 10 pounds.) Think the purple mountain majesties of a Yosemite or a Yellowstone are priceless? Think again. The total economic value of the National Park Service was recently estimated at \$92 billion.

Finally, there is the planet itself: Americans are willing to pay \$177 a year to avoid climate change and save the world. That's about 75 percent more than what they pay a month for cable TV.

What is the impetus behind such calculations? The short answer: cost-benefit analysis. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan passed executive order 12,291, which mandated cost-benefit analysis for all major environmental and health-and-safety regulations. Many of the above examples were the product of such analyses. But if you look back farther—before the Reagan era—to the mid-19th century, you'll find that the pricing of everyday life has long been an American pastime. Go back even farther, to the 18th century, and you will uncover some of the deep—and disturbing—origins of this American penchant to price everything and everyone.

In 1830, for example, the New York State Temperance Society measured the social damage produced by excessive drinking by pricing the overall cost to the city. "There cannot be a doubt," the society concluded after a series of in-depth calculations, "that the city suffers a dead yearly loss of three hundred thousand dollars" due to "time spent drinking," "drunkenness and strength diminished by it," "expenses of criminal persecutions," and "loss to the public by carelessness." An 1856 article titled "The Money or Commercial Value of Man" in Hunt's Merchants magazine—the first national business magazine in America—valued the education of New York children at a profit of \$500 million to the country.

In 1910, an article in the New York Times headlined "What the Baby is Worth as a National Asset" utilized Yale economist Irving Fisher's money valuation of human beings to deduce that "an 8 pound baby is worth, at birth, \$362 a pound." By 1913, as eugenics became the rage, the National Committee for Mental Hygiene asserted that the insane were "responsible for loss of \$135,000,000 a year to the nation."

Such acts of social pricing, while rare in the early 19th century, were ubiquitous by the early 20th. The common thread running through these examples is that the men (and they were nearly all men) who made these calculations were imagining American society as a capitalized investment and its inhabitants as income-generating units of human capital.

Aspects of everyday life such as education, mental health or alcohol consumption could only be given price tags if one treated American society and its residents as a series of moneymaking assets, thus measuring their value in accordance to their ability (or, in the case of hungover employees surfing the net, their inability) to generate monetary income. This uniquely capitalist way of conceiving of the world, which I have called "investmentality," was already poignantly on display in that 1856 Hunt's Merchants magazine article which priced the value of a child's education.

"The brain is ... an agricultural product of great commercial investment," noted the author, and the "greatest problem of political economy" was how to "produce the best brain and render it most profitable."

Today, as the term "human capital" crops up everywhere and countless self-help experts encourage Americans to become more productive by "investing in yourself," an investmentality has achieved the status of common sense.

The investmentality that sparked the pricing of everyday American life emerged out of the rise of American capitalism. The key element that separates capitalism from previous forms of economic organization is not market exchange or monetary spending (those have been around for thousands of years) but rather widespread capital investment. Such investments are acts through which various aspects of everyday life—be they natural resources, industrial factories, cultural productions, or technological inventions—are reconceived as income-generating assets and valued as such. As capital flowed into

various investment channels across the United States in the 19th century, distinctly capitalist quantification techniques escaped the confines of the business world and seeped into every nook and cranny of society.

Like capitalism itself, the pricing of everyday life is not an exclusively American phenomenon. Similar examples of investmentality and social monetization first appeared in 17th-century England and can now be found across the globe. What distinguishes America is the enthusiasm with which our elites embraced money measures. As early as the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville recognized that “as one digs deeper into the national character of the Americans, one sees that they have sought the value of everything in this world only in the answer to this single question: how much money will it bring in?”

There are various reasons why the United States embraced the pricing of everyday life more than other nations—including the long-standing American tendency to leave much of the responsibility for the allocation of resources, cultural production and economic development in the hands of private capitalists rather than public states.

Yet one reason demands a few final words: American slavery. The “chattel principle” and the rise of an economic institution in which human beings were actually bought and sold helped to jumpstart, legitimize, and normalize the pricing of everyday life. On the rare occasions when early Americans did seek to evaluate social developments in monetary values, slaves served as their main source of both inspiration and data.

The earliest instances of the pricing of everyday American life I discovered in my research were from South Carolina in the 1710s—the colony with the highest proportion of slaves and the most capital invested (especially in large rice plantations). By the 1740s, James Glen, South Carolina

governor and slaveholding planter, anticipated the invention of gross domestic product two centuries later by calculating the income generating “value” of all inhabitants of the colony at £40,000 a year.

Up North, similar developments were afoot. In 1731, Benjamin Franklin priced the social cost of a smallpox epidemic in Philadelphia by calculating each loss of life at £30 because that was the going price of slaves in the city. He was not alone. “Calculating the value of each person, in a pecuniary view, only at the price of a negro,” the newspaper called the *Weekly magazine* estimated the monetized worth of all Americans as “equal to nearly one hundred million sterling” in the 1790s.

It was, in short, often the institution of slavery that set important historical precedents by first enabling early Americans to price the residents of their young nation, be they free or enslaved. By the mid-19th century—following a half-century in which Southern investment in human bodies (alongside Northern investment in real estate, railroads and factories) had fanned the flames of American investmentality—slavery finally came to an end. The pricing of everyday life, however, was just taking off.

*Eli Cook is an assistant professor of history at the University of Haifa. An historian of American capitalism, he is the author of “The Pricing of Progress: Economic Indicators and the Capitalization of American Life” (Harvard University Press).*

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# Letter: Camp Rich gang helps serve needy

To the community,

Normally the Camp Richardson Resort staff is busy seeing to the needs of their many visitors and guests, but during the month of December they shift their focus to helping the members of our community who are struggling with hunger. Through their Adopt A Day of Nourishment sponsorship, Camp Richardson hosted Bread & Broth's Monday dinner at St. Theresa Grace Hall on Dec. 18 and provided meals for the 100 dinner guests that evening.

Bringing the same level of service and helpfulness they bring to their work, the Camp Richardson sponsor crew was a treat to have helping the B&B volunteers. Led by Vanessa Santora, Camp Richardson's operations manager and the coordinator for their AAD sponsorships, she was joined by fellow team members Darren Foerschler, Beacon general manager; Travis Lauinger, assistant resort and sports center manager; James Roberts, lodging operations manager, and Doug Sheehan, purchasing manager.

"We're so thankful to be a part of the Adopt A Day program," commented Santora. "It's always a heartwarming experience. From the incredible B&B staff to the wonderful people we have the pleasure to serve; Bread & Broth is a must anytime of the year."

B&B's partnership with Camp Richardson Resort is a wonderful example of how empathy and compassion for the most vulnerable bring people together to positively impact the lives of others all year long.

**Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth**

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# Opinion: Predicting the news of 2018

By Kathryn Reed

Just because the headlines of 2017 are in the past does not mean the issues are gone.

#MeToo or as *Time* magazine called the movement – The Silence Breakers in naming them the person of the year – is bound to be a significant carryover into 2018.

While the high profile cases of the upper echelon garner the bulk of the headlines, the magazine pointed out sexual abuse is at all levels. For hotel workers, some are treated like an amenity – a toy of sorts – for high paying clients. How often has this happened in Lake Tahoe?

Some of the women whose names are part of these stories are powerful in their own right. And, yet, look how long it took them to stand up for themselves and all women? If they were afraid, imagine how terrifying it is for the “average” woman to come forward.

The truth is powerful. It can also be scary. And it always has consequences.

At the last South Lake Tahoe City Council meeting one of the electeds said how he was surprised to learn that *unwanted* hugs are a form of harassment. Incredulously, one of his colleagues pointed out that it was *unwanted*. He said he is a hugger, as though his desire to hug someone is more important than the recipient's. He asked how he was supposed to know the person didn't want a hug. His colleague said just don't hug.

Really, that is the bottom line. Just don't do *it*. Whatever *it* is.

It's hard to find a woman who can't use the MeToo hashtag. That's so incredibly sad. We all have a story, some horrifying and life altering, others just an annoyance like a cat call.

Another headline apt to carry over into this new year is the growing chasm between the haves and have nots. The divide in the Lake Tahoe Basin is growing every day. The economy is great – for some. It is tanking for others. Wages are not keeping up with the cost of living. Every basic bill is going up – food, gas, utilities (garbage, electric, water, phone). Rents are going up, as well as insurance (medical, homeowners, business), and of course taxes. It doesn't end.

More people on the edge are going to fall off. Then what?

People want things for cheap or free. They don't want to pay fair market. My prediction is that some of the things we take for granted that are free today will not exist or will be completely different a year from today, maybe even *Lake Tahoe News*. Businesses can't keep giving things away without compensation. Life is an evolution – personally and professionally.

Housing will continue to be in the news. It will be in the form of affordable housing, homelessness, and vacation rentals. People want government to solve their problems, but are all of these issues really the job of government? That in itself is a discussion that is warranted because it will help lead to the answers. Compromise is going to be needed, and that is going to be hard for a lot of people. We all want to get our way, but sometimes doing things for the greater good is better. Selflessness is required, and that is always difficult.

As we forge a path in this new year, let's remember to do so with respect. Let's listen. Let's not talk over others. Let's



not dismiss people because we disagree with them. Let's start figuring out what we want and then chip away at the hurdles to accomplish those goals.

We have a strong, passionate, engaged group of residents, second homeowners and visitors who love Lake Tahoe. We are all stewards with a stake in the region's future. Let's find that common ground where in a year from now there are fewer people wondering how their bills will get paid, where their next meal will come from, if they will be assaulted.

Let's be better than the headlines.

*Kathryn Reed is publisher of Lake Tahoe News.*

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## **Opinion: Calif. losing its prized rural forestland**

**By Jane Braxton Little, Sacramento Bee**

California values forests. From coastal stands of iconic redwoods to high-elevation pines, trees cover 33 million acres, nearly one-third of the state. Private owners manage around 40 percent of these forests, an area more than twice the size of Alaska's Denali National Park.

Today California is losing these prized forestlands incrementally – one luxury home, one ski run at a time.

Lawmakers have historically recognized the critical role private forests play in the state's economy and beyond: providing water and wildlife habitat, storing carbon, creating and retaining soil. Among the steps they have taken to protect timberlands is the Forest Taxation Reform Act of 1976, the

cornerstone of California forest policy. It establishes Timber Production Zoning (TPZ) designed to promote the long-term growth of timber on private lands by offering tax incentives that encourage protection of young trees and restrict other land uses.

**Read the whole story**

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## **Letter: Warm room thankful for community support**

**To the community,**

Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless is pleased to announce that the warm room will move from Lake Tahoe Community Presbyterian Church to 1195 Rufus Allen Blvd., a property owned by the city of South Lake Tahoe, and begin operating out of that location at 7pm on the evening of Jan. 1. The warm room is expected to operate out of the Rufus Allen location until it closes for the season on April 1, 2018.

I would like to thank Pastor Bob Kelley and the congregation of Lake Tahoe Community Presbyterian Church for opening their doors to us during the holiday week, a time when many that live in hotels cannot afford high-season rates. I also would like to thank the city for leasing us the space on Rufus Allen, as well as residents and others who frequent the surrounding area for providing valuable feedback on how we can best operate in the area. Our goal is to be a great neighbor, and I think adjusting our operating hours, employing private security patrols, and maintaining a proactive, problem-solving approach will help us do that.

The warm room will be open from 7pm to 8:30am to provide shelter to those in need during its operating season. In addition to a safe and warm place to sleep, the warm room offers community resources including outreach from health and human services, outreach from the Department of Mental Health, information on Rapid Rehousing, substance abuse support groups, and support with career and education goals through collaboration with local agencies and organizations.

**Marissa Muscat, Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless executive director**

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## **Letter: Frustrated with noise from SnowGlobe**

**To the community,**

It's 10:30pm (Dec. 29) and it sounds like SnowGlobe is in the living room of my home along the Bijou Meadow. Unfortunately, the only part of the concert we can hear is the incessant bass overlaid by what sounds like a huge swarm of bees—even the most ardent percussionist would not call it music.

On Friday evening my wife and I took our regular walk through the Bijou neighborhoods around 5pm and walked past Councilmember Tom Davis' home just as Tom was going to his car. We've known each other over the years so we talked for a moment about SnowGlobe, which was pretty loud at his house, too, and he said he was heading to the college to talk to the promoter about the excess volume. I really appreciate Tom's willingness to listen to me and any effort he made on behalf of our neighborhood. Unfortunately, after the first of very loud noise it seems he wasn't very successful.

I invite any residents, and especially city leaders, to come to our neighborhood, or any neighborhood within a quarter mile of SnowGlobe and hear what we hear.

Most of the folks in our neighborhood, the Ranchos, are longtime residents and have supported the development quality projects in SLT, including LTCC and Bijou Park, and we are not ignorant of the value tourists provide to our community. However, we have continued to live here because we believe in a quality lifestyle. Any of us living in a resort community expect some inconvenience throughout the year, but SnowGlobe is far beyond being simply disruptive.

It is time that our city leaders work with residents to either dramatically modify this event or find a venue that is appropriate for it.

*Rich Fischer has had a home bordering the Bijou Meadow for 27 years. He served as the superintendent of Lake Tahoe Unified School District from 1989 through 1997 and currently serves on the El Dorado County School Board.*

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## **Opinion: Calif. falls short on educating students**

**By Dan Walters, CalMatters**

The fundamental mission of a K-12 school system should be to have as many students as humanely possible graduate from high school with the fundamental skills they need to succeed as adults.

We Californians who are already adults sometimes lose sight of

that goal as we bicker over financing, curriculum, testing and other pedagogic issues involved with educating 6 million students.



Dan Walters

California's high school graduation rates, once abysmally low, have improved somewhat in recent years, although the factors in that improvement are a little cloudy. It's unclear whether kids are being better educated and thus are more capable of meeting graduation requirements or the requirements themselves have been dumbed-down.

It's noteworthy that the Legislature has eliminated the high school exit examination. It tested the essential knowledge and skills 12 years of education were to have provided. Passage was required before a diploma could be awarded, but the exam was criticized for blocking too many students, particularly poor, Latino and black students, from graduation.

We also know that too many of the state's high school graduates entering college—40 percent of enrollees in the California State University system, for instance—have been required to take remedial English and math courses because their high school instruction fell short.

Faced with that dilemma, CSU is eliminating such courses and folding remediation into courses required for graduation—a policy aimed at increasing college graduation rates but one that could mask, rather than solve, high schools' failures.

A recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California

points out that even without an exit exam, California's high school graduation requirements, in terms of academic courses taken and passed, are among the nation's lowest and are also significantly lower than what CSU and the University of California require for admission.

A concurrent PPIC report underscores the failure of the state's school systems to produce enough graduates prepared to succeed in college and thus fill the state's needs.

"Far too many California students are falling off the pathway to and through college," the PPIC study concludes. "At current rates of high school and college completion, only about 30 percent of California 9th graders will earn a bachelor's degree, a rate that is insufficient for an economy that increasingly demands more highly educated workers."

The report points out that most California high school graduates do not complete the courses required for college admission, and "even academically prepared students are falling off the pathway" by starting, but not completing, the required courses, with black and Latino students particularly "likely to drop off the pathway at every stage."

Finally, CSU does not have the capacity to enroll and educate those students who have completed admission requirements, PPIC says.

"In the past four years, CSU has turned away more than 69,000 qualified California high school graduates, who have completed the ... course requirements," its study found.

California's shortcomings in preparing students for and later delivering successful higher education will bite a state whose economy, as PPIC says, increasingly needs highly educated workers.

No, not every Californian needs a four-year college degree. And society needs lots of skilled workers without college

diplomas to produce services and goods and maintain our machinery, from cars to power plants, and technology.

However, we do need enough college-educated workers to replace retiring members of the baby-boom generation and keep us competitive in a global economy, and we need those graduates to be truly educated, not just shuffled through a system with lowered standards.

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# Opinion: Calif.'s next governor will be its most powerful

By Joe Mathews

Who is the most powerful governor in California history?

The next one.



Joe Mathews

Our state's governorship has grown so great in reach and power that it now constitutes a second American presidency.

California governors now routinely sign international treaties. They head a state government that operates as a

fourth branch of American government—employing regulations, lawsuits, and the size of the California market to check the president and Congress. Here at home, our governors dominate not only politics and policy but also California's civic conversation itself.

California's centralized executive power contrasts with the state's image as complex and diverse, with a progressive culture and innovative technology bent on disrupting existing structures. But this diversity and complexity—and the resulting frustration about getting anything done—is at the heart of the governor's power.

Precisely because it's so hard to get attention and to orchestrate policy among so many unruly constituencies, Californians are often desperate to find someone—anyone—with the agency to make a decision and accomplish what they want. And that person has been, more often than not, the governor.

For the past 40 years, the governor's authority has grown, as power was transferred from local governments to Sacramento, via state court decisions (notably equalizing school funding) and by ballot initiatives (like Proposition 13, which restricted local taxation).

As Sacramento made more decisions for Californians, governors worked to enhance their office's power. Pete Wilson pioneered the use of executive orders for vital policy changes. Gray Davis devised new ways to intervene in the legislative process, declaring of legislators: "Their job is to implement my vision."

Arnold Schwarzenegger devised ballot initiative campaigns to give himself greater leverage with the Legislature. He also pushed through climate change legislation that empowers the state's regulatory agencies to enforce one of the most complicated environmental regimes on Earth.

The state's regular budget crises also enhanced gubernatorial



power; governors demanded wider room to manage the state's budget and cash, as the price of compromise. Gov. Jerry Brown also has skillfully bargained for more authority; the state's new law to establish a \$15 minimum wage by 2022 gives the governor the power to delay the hike for different reasons.

And voters, disgusted by gridlock that was easily blamed on the Legislature, have often granted more authority to governors. The most dramatic example was when voters installed legislative term limits in 1990. With that change, lawmakers and staffs could stay for only a few years a time, whereas in the executive branch the governor could rely on department heads and powerful regulators who had long careers and inside knowledge.

The Legislature has failed to counter such executive power—its relatively small number of lawmakers is stretched thin, and has little time for detailed hearings, investigation, or oversight of the governor and his administration. The Legislature also doesn't have the same institutional infrastructure to produce data and reports to guide policymaking; when legislators make laws and budgets, they often rely on the executive branch's numbers.

More recent political reforms also have weakened the Legislature and thus strengthened the governor. In 2008, voters stripped the Legislature of perhaps its greatest power—the power to draw legislative districts—and gave it to an independent commission. And in 2010, voters got rid of the requirement of a two-thirds vote to pass a budget, which had given the minority party in the Legislature considerable power to challenge the governor.

These days, the opposition has little juice. All the governor needs is the support of the two leaders of the majority party in the Legislature. In this era of one-party Democratic control, that majority party is the governor's own party, further enhancing his power.

California's diminished media also reinforces the notion that the governor is the only game in town. With fewer reporters covering Sacramento, the governor has become the only politician who is covered regularly. Even state Sen. Kevin de León, who has been the most influential legislator of this decade and is now running for U.S. Senate, remains little known across the state.

In much of Sacramento, the power of the governor is considered a positive. In a state so big, goes the argument, it's good to have one elected official—the governor—who can focus attention and accountability.

Of course, that's only true if Californians pick a governor who can use that power responsibly. And right now, few of us are paying much attention to the gubernatorial contest. Instead, Californians are deeply worried about all the power in the American presidency, and how it might be misused by the current occupant of the White House.

But the perils of runaway executive power aren't limited to Washington, D.C. Pay attention, California, because it could happen here.

*Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.*

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## **Opinion: CalPERS about to bury taxpayers in more debt**

**By Daniel Borenstein, Bay Area News Group**

Brace yourself taxpayers: CalPERS is about to bury you deeper

in debt.

The nation's largest pension system is expected to adopt a funding plan this week that anticipates shortfalls during the next decade and then banks on exceptional investment returns over the following half century to make up the difference.

It's an absurd strategy designed to placate labor unions, who want more public money available now for raises, and local government officials who are struggling to make annual installment payments on past debt CalPERS has rung up.

**Read the whole story**

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## **Letter: Asking for help with SnowGlobe noise**

**Publisher's note: *This letter was sent to the South Lake Tahoe City Council, city manager and media.***

Hi all – I hope you all had a nice holiday.

I'm writing this letter because I have seen quite a few articles online mentioning that the SnowGlobe noise is anticipated to be louder than last year because of the lack of snow.

I was wondering if I could ask the city manager and/or council to be proactive with this situation and have the promoter turn the noise level down.

If you know it's going to be louder than previous years, why not turn it down ahead of time instead of waiting for people to complain. Again, be proactive instead of reactive.

I've included the press in this email because I want it noted that someone thought ahead and asked the people in charge to do something about an issue they see coming.

I know email tonality is a tricky thing and I want to express that I want this email to come across as asking you to do something, not telling you to do it.

Thanks for your time.

**John Spinoła, South Lake Tahoe**