

China has punished 970 people for misusing funds earmarked for a poverty relief campaign intended to lift everyone in rural areas out of poverty by 2020.

Cellphone usage is the new smoking

Smartphone devices are a scourge. Everyone is abused regularly by having to listen to one-sided conversations in public spaces or by colleagues and friends who don't pay attention to conversations but focus instead on their screens.

A recent British survey found that the average person looks at their mobile phone 27 times a day, and that doesn't include the restaurant patrons, train passengers, and classroom students whose gaze never leave their screens for long periods of time, financialpost.com wrote.

To a millennial, 27 times daily would be categorized as "light" use which is why educators and employers are increasingly complaining about the lack of work ethic among young employees whose ears and eyes are captive to their phones, instead of to their customers or tasks.

The cellphone has encouraged a form of social autism and is a hazard in the workplace and on the road.

Governments first clamped down on hand-held cell usage by drivers following accidents and fatalities. Now "distracted driving" legislation is in place across Canada, in 16 US states and in all states for novice drivers. Text messaging by drivers is banned everywhere.

The road is not the only place where cellphones cause public mischief.

Last week France took draconian action and announced a blanket ban on cellphones in all of its elementary and secondary schools this September due to "public health" concerns. France has banned cells from classrooms but this has not worked and now prohibition extends to breaks, lunch times and in between lessons.

"We must come up with a way of protecting pupils from loss of concentration via screens and phones. These days the children don't play at break time anymore, they are just all in front of their smartphones and from an educational [and health] point of view, that's a problem," said France's education minister in an interview last week.



financialpost.com

Bans in schools are in place intermittently in Canada and the US, but evidence mounts that phones are used to embarrass, bully, distract from lessons, and impede concentration. Eventually, blanket bans will and should result.

Besides public spaces, the private sector is starting to target cellphones in the workplace, notably construction sites or wherever dangerous equipment is used. Cellphones have become a safety problem.

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business said that 61 percent of its members cite excessive personal phone usage as the biggest challenge to workplace productivity. Their survey represents more than half of all small

businesses in Canada and companies stated that negative impacts also include customer service.

Bans and restrictions are cropping up everywhere and some ban smartphones and replace them with basic handsets if instant communication is needed on the job. Increasingly, phones are frowned upon or prohibited in meetings. Some companies ask attendees to leave their phones turned off and in a basket during meetings.

On a deeper level, the cellphone and texting pandemic represents a cultural shift. Voice communications are reduced, and face-to-face relationships are less prevalent in society, families and

workplaces. Social skills, essential to life, are disappearing.

There is a growing concern about youth phone addiction, notably those who began at a young age and now substitute devices for human relationships.

Over-usage is replacing manners. Ask yourself: How many times have you been conversing with someone only to have a phone call interrupt the communication, without apology?

In France, there is a movement among restaurants to ban mobile phone usage at the table.

Sounds silly, but look around any eatery or cafeteria or dinner table. Screens separate humans from one another.

Opioid abuse blamed for new fall in US life expectancy

For the second year in a row the richest country in the world has posted a shocking decline in life expectancy.

It is the first time in half a century to see two consecutive annual falls in the US, mostly down to the opioid crisis. The last double rise was in 1963 when tobacco was king and there was a flu epidemic, euronews.com wrote.



innerrealmscenter.com

Fatalities jumped last year due to overdoses, many of them on prescription painkillers like OxyContin or Vicodin, now standing at 63,600 nationwide, a 21 percent increase on 2015.

The biggest problem is in West Virginia, a state which suffers from a decline in traditional industries like coal mining.

Donald Trump won the state with ease in the 2016 presidential election. Drug sales here have soared.

Drug wholesalers protest that they are not to blame as chemists and doctors are responsible for distribution. But critics point to the staggering amounts of opioids cleared for sale in the state. A report last year said that, ignoring rising overdose rates, over six years wholesalers pumped 780 million hydrocodone and oxycodone pills into West Virginia, enough for 433 pills for every man, woman and child.

The out-of-state companies ensured places like Kernit, population 392, were supplied with nine million pills, all sold through one high street store. While corrupt chemists are part of the problem, they cannot sell what they do not have on the shelves.

Taking on giant pharma was a theme of Donald Trump's election campaign. He has gone quiet on it since entering the White House.

Police spread Christmas joy to children with incarcerated parents

It is certainly the season of giving, but for some central Arkansas families, they've already given up a lot this year.

1-in-28 children in the US have a parent that is currently incarcerated. Not only does that strain them emotionally, but it can also be a financial strain for guardians, thv11.com wrote.

One law enforcement agency worked hard to change that. It's a knock no one wants to hear: Jefferson County Sheriff's Deputies on your door step, two days before Christmas.

"Wendy? Are you Wendy? I think you're the person we are looking for," said one deputy.

Friday was certainly the exception to the rule. "So Wendy, we are here actually just to say Merry Christmas to you, Mayor Lafayette Woods told Wendy.

"Ok," she said. "It's not a joke, it's real. This is serious. You are one of four families in Jefferson County who was picked to provide gifts to," Woods explained.

"I didn't even know I was entered," she told him.



thv11.com

"We understand this time of year sometimes money gets tight," he said.

"It does," she answered. Jefferson County Sheriff's deputies gave presents to children with incarcerated parents.

"Thanks guys. I really appreciate this," Wendy said to the deputies.

"We brought them today, but you don't get to open them up today. You've got to wait to open it up until Christmas. You've got to promise me not to peek in the bag. Promise?" asked Major Woods of a child to whom they delivered presents.

Joyce Boykins was in shock, thought it was some sort of trick, when the deputies showed up with gifts for her three teenage grandchildren.

"When they first come to the door, you don't think anything good because ain't nobody got no money now. It's Christmas. I'm struggling," she said. Her disbelief quickly turned to joy.

"I used to work part time, but now I can't do anything, so you know I was thinking 'oh no, they can't come to my door this time of year. Not now. Lord no. I was shocked. I was really shocked.'"

Even though they may not have their mom or dad home this holiday season, the Sheriff's Office says they hope the gifts provide just a little bit of comfort in knowing that someone is thinking of them.

"They shouldn't suffer and shouldn't be not afforded an opportunity to experience Christmas like any other child that is fortunate just because that parent is absent, or they've got a guardian that may be having trouble," Major Woods later told us.

With poverty rising, many Brazilians spending Christmas hungry

In 2014, the United Nations World Food Programme dropped Brazil from its world hunger map. But now, Latin America's most populous country is in danger of being relisted, as millions return to poverty.

Agatha Lorane, her nine-month-old baby Perola, and cousins have been sleeping on a sidewalk in Copacabana for the last two months. They don't have enough money to buy food, cgn.com reported.

"It all started after I was fired from a shopping mall job," Lorane said.

"Now, I'm selling candles for Christmas until I find another job so I can get off of the streets."

She is not alone.

Despite a recent drop in unemployment, there are still about 13 million unemployed Brazilians, and many more are sliding below the poverty line. After a dramatic decline in poverty under the Workers' Party, Brazil was removed from the UN hunger map in 2014. But there are concerns that it could be reinstated.

So now an NGO has partnered with



paraisaparadise.com

the UN to help collect more than 500 tons of food by the end of December, in an initiative called Christmas Without Hunger.

"We have something that we see each day in the communities we visit," executive director Rodrigo Afonso said.

"What they say is that they don't want

more culture or more education as they would have two three years ago. They want food. That's what they want now."

Campaign organizers say they are trying to raise consciousness among Brazilians before the problem gets worse.

People living in the streets is just one of the signs of Brazil's return to poverty. Economists say the country's deep recession, high unemployment and cuts in social programs are to blame.

According to a study released in June by Brazil's prestigious **Getulio Vargas Foundation**, poverty is on the rise again. Poverty once reached 25 percent of the country's population, but managed to fall before beginning to rise once again.

"It went down to eight percent and in the last two years, it went back to 11.2 percent, so 5.5 million people reentered poverty," the foundation's director **Marcelo Neri** said.

Agatha is one of the 22 million Brazilians living below the poverty line. In the meantime, the government insists on implementing unpopular austerity measures in order, it said, to put the economy back on track.

German conservatives eye 65,000 cap on migrants

Germany should cap the number of new immigrants to around 65,000 a year, the deputy leader of Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives said, a position that could prove divisive in coalition talks with the Social Democrats (SPD).

Merkel is trying to forge a new governing coalition with the SPD after talks with two smaller parties collapsed last month. Exploratory talks are due to begin on Jan. 7, and Merkel hopes to reach a deal by mid-January, Reuters reported.

Merkel has blamed Sept. 24 election losses on public concern at her 2015 decision to allow in over a million migrants, and now favors a tougher stance on deporting migrants accused of crimes.

Thomas Strobl, deputy leader of Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU), told the Heilbronner Stimme newspaper there could be no repeat of that wave of migrants and



reutersmedia.net

Germany needed to return to more 'normal' numbers, below the limit of 200,000 that the CDU agreed with its Bavarian sister party in October.

"I'm not thinking of the much-discussed 200,000 per

year," Strobl said in an interview published on Saturday.

"The target should be the number from the year 2012 when 65,000 refugees came."

The SPD opposes a cap on migration and efforts by conservatives to extend a suspension of family reunifications for migrants granted "subsidiary protection" rather than full asylum that is due to expire in March 2018.

Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, a top SPD member, told broadcaster ARD that his ministry would drop an appeal against a court ruling that allows the family of a 16-year-old Syrian migrant to join him in Germany.

Gabriel told the Funke newspaper group in a separate interview that Germany could not meet the needs of all those who wanted to move there, and urged steps to encourage other European Union members to take in more migrants.

He said it was also clear that Germany needed to deport migrants that entered illegally.