

# The New York Times

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

### THE WEATHER

Today, cooler, cloudy in the morning, afternoon sun, high 63. Tonight, clear, low 47. Tomorrow, sunny to partly cloudy, a light breeze, high 64. Weather map appears on Page D8.

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MONDAY, MAY 11, 2026

Prices in Canada may be higher

\$4.00



DANIEL BEREHLAK/THE NEW YORK TIMES

## In Lebanon, Mourning 8 Members of a Family

Israel has escalated its attacks, further eroding a truce with Hezbollah. Among those killed on Saturday was a 6-month-old. Page A8.

## As Costs Rise, Piling Up Debt Just to Get By

By STACY COWLEY

On paper, Alex Watts's household looks financially stable. He and his wife together earn a bit more than \$140,000 a year; own their home near Columbus, Ohio; have great credit scores; and stay on top of their bills. When an unexpected expense hits, like a car repair or a hospital trip, they always find a way to cover it.

But amid the ever-growing costs of groceries, gasoline and electricity, their monthly expenses are running into the red and their monthly credit card balances have gotten larger. To pay them down, they drive less to save money on gas and have stopped putting away money for savings.

"I'm working between eight and 12 hours of overtime every week," said Mr. Watts, 36, a hospital nurse raising three young children. "We're cutting even, at best, but sometimes we're spending more than we're getting."

The Watts are among an increasing number of households leaning on credit to make ends meet as the costs of essentials — including housing, health care, utilities and food — keep rising. Credit card balances reached a record \$1.3 trillion at the end of last year, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's latest quarterly study of household debt, and more and more people are applying for new credit cards. Applications for credit rose in February to their highest level since late 2022.

The strain from this increasing debt load is starting to show, with the percentage of after-tax income that households spend paying down debt ticking up since early 2025, according to Federal Reserve data.

Banks say they are not seeing signs of serious distress. Jamie Dimon, chief executive of JPMorgan, said late last month that consumer borrowing habits looked "fundamentally healthy."

But across all consumer debts, the share that is delinquent rose to 4.8 percent, the highest tally since 2017. For the first time in more than a decade, the national average credit score dipped last year, according to data from Experian, one of the three major U.S. credit bureaus.

The data may also understate Continued on Page A12

## Huge Layoffs as Iran Businesses Buckle in War

By LEILY NIKOUNAZAR

In mid-March, Babak, a 49-year-old Iranian product designer at a tech company in Tehran, was called into his boss's office and told that his position was being eliminated.

Iran's government had shut down the internet two weeks earlier, at the outset of U.S.-Israeli war on the country, throwing the tech industry into chaos and making Babak's job impossible.

"Throughout my career, I have worked hard, continuously learned, and tried to grow," said Babak, who sent voice messages to The New York Times, and

### Internet Shutdown Is a Factor in a Million Job Losses

asked to be identified only by his first name to avoid government reprisal. "Yet at this stage of my life, I find myself in an uncertain and ambiguous position," he said.

Babak's experience has become increasingly common throughout Iran as companies have instituted round after round of layoffs in recent weeks, according to interviews with businesses and em-

ployees and Iranian news reports.

For the Trump administration, Iran's severe economic struggles are part of a strategy to pressure the country into submission. "I hope it fails," President Trump told reporters this month, of Iran's economy. "You know why? Because I want to win."

Iranian officials insist that pressure will not work and that the country will not surrender.

Many of those companies are Continued on Page A8

**NEW PROPOSAL** Iran's formal response to the U.S.'s overture offers few details. PAGE A8

## An Audacious Plot Unveils Possible Spying by Beijing

### With Sensitivities High for U.S. and China, Trying to Get Details on House Panel

By DUSTIN VOLZ

WASHINGTON — When a man identifying himself as Chris Chen reached out this winter to an aide on a House committee focused on threats from China, he came armed with a lucrative offer.

The staff member, Mr. Chen proposed, could earn \$10,000 or more by barely lifting a finger. All he would need to do is agree to phone calls every other week to share information about the committee's work and U.S. foreign policy on China.

Insights into U.S. trade or national security issues, including the Trump administration's plans for Venezuela in the aftermath of the January military operation there, would be especially valuable, Mr. Chen said. To sweeten the pot, Mr. Chen repeatedly promised to send the aide \$2,000 up front.

The offer seemed too good to be true. Instead of quietly accepting the deal, the aide, whose identity The New York Times agreed to withhold because he works on sensitive policy issues related to China, reported it to his bosses on the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party. The panel quickly concluded that Mr. Chen was not the Singapore-based business consultant he claimed to be, but instead most likely a Chinese intelligence officer or contractor seeking a new recruit.

Rather than cut off contact, the committee's Republican-majority staff agreed to keep talking to Mr. Chen. They recorded a series of calls this winter to learn more about his tactics and interests.

Transcripts of those calls, which the committee shared with The Times alongside some of the recorded audio, depict a determined, at times impatient, individual eager to earn the trust of his mark and get down to business. Mr. Chen mixes holiday greetings

with elaborate questions about manufacturing in Vietnam and Mexico, and the future of Venezuela's oil industry.

Beijing and Washington have been aggressively spying on each other for decades, an inevitable byproduct of what are now the world's two largest economies competing across the globe. But by their nature, those shadow games rarely surface such a detailed look at how either side plies its trade.

The outreach by Mr. Chen to an



HAIYUN JIANG/THE NEW YORK TIMES

President Trump and Xi Jinping of China plan to meet.

aide on the very committee responsible for investigating Chinese national security threats appears to provide an unusually vivid portrait of how Beijing's spy services seek to gain access to sensitive information from within the corridors of power in Washington.

By some measures, the spying Continued on Page A7

**READY FOR FIGHT** Beijing is building up its legal arsenal for a showdown on trade issues. PAGE B1



GIANFRANCO TRIPODO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Some of the jamón ibérico that is sliced by Ernesto Soriano is worth tens of thousands of dollars.

### THE GLOBAL PROFILE ERNESTO SORIANO

## Life Behind the Most Treasured Blade in Spain

By JASON HOROWITZ

MADRID — At the Madrid Open tennis tournament last month, Ernesto Soriano, a bald veteran with a wild gray beard, a tattooed torso and a belly protruding under his match-day whites, mesmerized salivating fans with precise forehead slices.

"These tennis players don't have the arm you've got," said Jacinto Medina, holding two glasses of red wine in one hand

### A Man Once Brought to Tears by Ham

as he reached for a plate of cured ham perfectly cut by Mr. Soriano. Mr. Medina, a business executive, was among hundreds of V.I.P.s on a long line in a dining area behind the center court stadium, where Mr. Soriano's ham-carving station was the star

attraction.

"Yeah," Mr. Soriano, 53, responded with a smile as his knife flashed through a leg of cured ham from the 2020 vintage. "My serve is probably stronger."

Mr. Soriano is the top-ranked cutter for Joseito, one of Spain's oldest and arguably most prestigious producers of jamón ibérico — cured ham rendered from a special breed of acorn-fed black pigs. For him, the Madrid Open Continued on Page A10

## Schools Facing Painful Choices As Number of Children Shrinks

This article is by Sarah Mervosh, Francesca Paris and Claire Cain Miller.

As American women have fewer babies each year, the number of young children in the United States is dwindling. The trend is now catching up to the nation's public school districts.

There are simply fewer children to attend school in America today: The number of public school students in kindergarten through 12th grade has fallen in 30 states since the mid-2010s.

Declining enrollment has hit many of the nation's largest urban school districts, including Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, a New York Times analysis found. But smaller and suburban districts are shrinking at a similar rate.

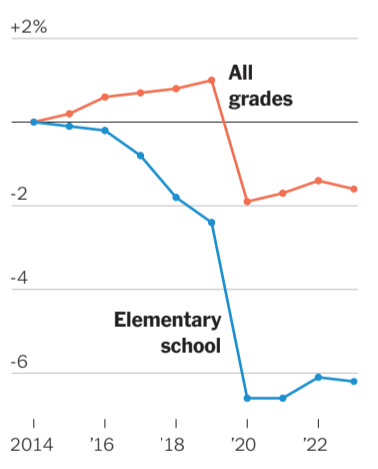
Fewer students means less funding, which is tied to enrollment numbers. Many districts are now facing painful budget cuts — and heated conversations about whether to close schools.

Several factors are affecting enrollment. For cities, housing costs and other expenses are driving some families out. The recent crackdown on immigration means fewer children are arriving from other countries, a demographic that had buoyed enrollment nationwide.

Many public school districts also lost students during the pandemic, and they are now facing more competition than ever, from private schools, homeschooling, charter schools and

### Dwindling Enrollment in U.S. Public Schools

Change in enrollment since 2014



Source: National Center for Education Statistics. THE NEW YORK TIMES

virtual schools.

Data suggests that U.S. private schools had a small bump in enrollment during the pandemic, though it is unclear how much that has been sustained. This includes Catholic schools, where enrollment increased during the pandemic, but has declined overall over the last decade. Private schools are also set to benefit from new school voucher programs in many states, which help families pay for private education.

But experts say the biggest factor in declining enrollment is the record-low U.S. fertility rate. It most recently peaked in 2007, and has fallen 24 percent since then.

Continued on Page A12



INTERNATIONAL A4-10

### Ship Evacuated in Spain

Passengers and crew left a vessel tied to an outbreak of hantavirus after it anchored off the Canary Islands. PAGE A10

### Joining Up in Thailand

The military draft lottery is mandatory for men, but volunteer enlistments have soared in a sluggish economy. PAGE A4

BUSINESS B1-6

### Seizing on a Carrier's Demise

JetBlue Airways is adding dozens of flights at Spirit Airlines' former home airport near Miami as it attempts to turn a profit again. PAGE B1

### Ripples from a Faraway War

Taiwan, one of the world's top plastic users, is facing a supply crunch caused by unrest in the Middle East. PAGE B1

OBITUARIES B7

### Star of Daughter's Memoir

Xia De-hong, 94, was the subject of "Wild Swans," the story of a mother enduring degradations under Mao.



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### Serving Up Red Meat

At the Meatstock carnivore convention, attendees bonded over the belief that steak is good medicine. PAGE A18

### A Question of Succession

Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio are raising their profiles, spurring 2028 talk. PAGE A14

SPORTS D1-8

### Helping Asian Players Fit In

Many Pacific Rim baseball standouts quickly feel at home when they join a North American team. But some do not, as the Astros have learned this season with a struggling pitcher. PAGE D1

### N.F.L.'s Post-Draft Outlooks

Which rosters improved most? Which grew worse? Is there still work that can be done? With off-season workouts approaching, it is time to break down the forecast for every team. PAGES D4-5

OPINION A16-17

### Julia Angwin

PAGE A16



ARTS C1-6

### Taj Mahal's Enduring Blues

The artist, 83, who has just released a new album, has recorded with musicians from all over the world. "My sweep is global," he said. PAGE C1



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