

A Job Seeker's Desperate Choice

By [SHAILA DEWAN](#), [BUSINESS DAY](#), The New York Times, JUNE 21, 2014



CreditPaul Hoppe

On the morning of March 20, Shanesha Taylor had a job interview. It was for a good job, one that could support her three children, unlike the many positions she'd applied for that paid only \$10 an hour. The interview, at an insurance agency in Scottsdale, Ariz., went well. "Walking out of the office, you know that little skip thing people do?" she said, clicking her heels together in a corny expression of glee. "I wanted to do that."

But as she left the building and walked through the parking lot, she saw police officers surrounding her car, its doors flung open and a crime-scene van parked nearby. All the triumphant buoyancy of the

moment vanished, replaced by a hard, sudden knot of panic. Hours later, Ms. Taylor was posing for a mug shot, her face somber and composed, a rivulet of tears falling from each eye. A [subsequent headline](#) in The Huffington Post said it all: "Shanesha Taylor, Homeless Single Mom, Arrested After Leaving Kids in Car While on Job Interview."

The article ricocheted across the Internet. Many viewed her story — that she, unable to find child care, had left her two sons, aged 6 months and 2 years, in her 2006 Dodge Durango while she went to a 70-minute job interview — as emblematic of the harsh realities of today's economy, where jobs are scarce and well-paid ones even scarcer, and where desperate choices have become common. Certainly, many people could identify with the cruel math of Ms. Taylor's pretrial report, which put her monthly income at \$1,232 (including food stamps), while her monthly expenses totaled \$1,274.

Ms. Taylor, 35, was charged with two counts of felony child abuse, and soon became the subject of syndicated columns calling her the "true face of poverty," petitions asking the prosecutor to drop charges and a crowd-sourced fund-raising campaign that gathered \$115,000. After 10 days in jail, she was freed after strangers paid her \$9,000 bail. Her story was featured on the ["Today" show](#); her lawyer [was interviewed](#) by Bill O'Reilly. Then came the backlash, as critics contended that a woman who had put her children in peril was being made into a hero. Bill Montgomery, the Maricopa County attorney, contradicted news reports that Ms. Taylor was homeless and unemployed, saying she was actually neither. Her children — she also has a 9-year-old daughter who was in school at the time of the job interview — were removed from her custody.



Shanesha Taylor, 35, in a photograph provided by the Scottsdale, Ariz., police. Credit: Scottsdale Police, via Associated Press

All at once, Ms. Taylor had become a symbol of both economic desperation and shirked responsibility. Her story became fodder for polemic and preaching. But until a recent interview with The New York Times in a conference room at the office of her lawyer, Benjamin P. Taylor II (no relation), she had not spoken publicly.

Wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and with Antoine Duncan, 33, the father of her children, at her side, Ms. Taylor described how her life had slowly disintegrated during the recession, with low-paid jobs and irregular hours. In an attempt to improve her lot, she enrolled in a community college. When she spoke about her children, she teared up easily, bringing

to mind her now-famous mug shot. But she had a tendency to gloss over the details of her financial troubles unless pressed.

Even though her financial experiences hew closely to those of millions of Americans in the recession and its aftermath, she did not ascribe her troubles to broader economic forces. "I understand the economy is suffering," she said, "but in the grand scheme I can't explain to my daughter that 'The economy's bad, baby; that's why we don't have a home.' She's going to look at me and say, 'O.K., why don't you have a job?'"

From House to House

Ms. Taylor grew up in a household she described as “a little less than middle class.” Her mother and stepfather often worked more than one job each. “I don’t even know when they saw each other,” she said. She liked school but thought that college was financially out of reach, so after high school she joined the Air Force, stationed in Texas, North Dakota and Britain before returning home in 1999.

At the time, Phoenix was booming and the housing market was growing manic. Ms. Taylor soon found her niche as a mortgage loan officer, bringing home commissions large enough to rent a house and live comfortably. She reconnected with Mr. Duncan, whom she had met while in the Air Force, and in 2004, their daughter was born.

The overheated mortgage market in Phoenix was banking on the continued rise of home values. But after mid-2006, those values began to decline, making refinancing impossible for Ms. Taylor’s increasingly desperate clients.

In 2008, after the death of her grandmother, with whom she was close, Ms. Taylor quit her job, she said, to give herself time to regroup. But she never regained her economic footing. She spent down her savings, only to find that the customer-service and phone-sales jobs for which she qualified were paying less than before and were harder to come by. “I had to downgrade to an apartment; it got difficult paying day care, apartment, car payments, insurance — all the basic needs in life,” she said.

Although the number of low-wage jobs has grown nationally since the recession hit, their rebound has been slow in Arizona, while middle-wage jobs in health care and finance, particularly the insurance industry, have led the recovery, said [Lee McPheters](#), an economist at Arizona State University. In inflation-adjusted terms, he said, customer-service jobs pay less than they did before, and the state’s unemployment rate of 6.9 percent is still above the 6.3 percent national average.

Eventually, Ms. Taylor applied for food stamps and Medicaid. In January 2010, in an attempt to improve her prospects, she enrolled full time at [Estrella Mountain Community College](#), with plans to major in engineering. Ms. Taylor’s daughter went to day care and Ms. Taylor’s mother and stepfather helped care for her.

In late 2011, Ms. Taylor and Mr. Duncan had a son and were living together as a family. But they couldn’t afford rent and so they moved to a “weekly,” a cheap motel that is often the last stop before homelessness. Ms. Taylor was working in customer service, making \$12.35 an hour. To keep her student loan debt — now about \$30,000, she said — from ballooning, Ms. Taylor tried to pay for her own classes, but eventually took a break from school in mid-2012.

When money became even tighter, she and the children stayed with her parents. In 2013, her work hours were cut and she lost a child-care subsidy she’d been getting. She became pregnant with her younger son, was placed on bed rest, and during her absence she was fired, she said. By the time she was arrested, she said, she was filling in as an office aide at a home health care agency for about eight hours every other week. She was paid \$8 an hour in cash, she said. (The agency said Ms. Taylor had not worked there — she had been offered a job, the human resources manager said, but she had not taken it because she could not find child care.)

Living with her parents in Phoenix was not a permanent solution. When other serious family matters began to put a strain on them, Ms. Taylor said, she and the children decamped, going from house to house when friends or relatives could provide shelter. On a couple of occasions, she said, she and the children slept in the Durango for days at a time. Mr. Duncan was having his own troubles making ends meet, working sometimes as a day laborer and other times at call centers, and living in a small apartment with roommates. He now makes \$10 an hour doing customer service for a cable company.

“We don’t communicate well sometimes, and that’s pretty much it,” Ms. Taylor said in the interview. “Finances had a lot to do with it. You know, not being able to make ends meet sometimes strains a relationship.”

‘What Do I Do Now?’



Credit Paul Hoppe

More often than not, Ms. Taylor said, she was solely responsible for meeting her family’s needs. Her Facebook page, which she hasn’t updated since her arrest, is littered with encomiums about motherhood (sample: “Your children will become who you are, so be who you want them to be”), photographs of her children (caption: “love my babies to the

maxxxx”) and a recounting of her daughter’s fretting about Santa’s health (she wanted to leave him broccoli instead of cookies).

Ms. Taylor strove not to let her children feel the bite of poverty. “I would say, ‘O.K., we’re not going to go to Chuck E. Cheese’s today; we’re going to go to the park,’ ” she said.

Looking for stability, she applied for job after job — PetSmart for \$10 an hour, a bus company for \$10 an hour, an Internet service provider. But the job at a Farmers Insurance broker in Scottsdale was different. “Thirty-nine thousand the first year, \$65,000 the second year, \$89,000 the third year,” Ms. Taylor recited. “And the fourth year, with proper work, I could have had my own agency.” She thought her experience as a loan officer made her a perfect candidate. She had a feeling that the job would be hers.

The night before the interview, she put the children to bed at her parents’ house and went to a Walmart parking lot, where she spent hours scrounging up recyclable cans and asking passers-by for gas money, to make sure she had enough for the 35-mile drive to the interview. Her parents would be at work the next day, so she had arranged to leave the boys at a babysitter’s house, she said. But when she arrived, she said, no one answered the door.

“I felt like this was my opportunity to basically improve life for all of us, and the one key part of it is now not available, so what do I do now?” Ms. Taylor said. “That was my only thought: ‘What do I do now? What do I do now?’ That was kind of what started the whole chain of events that day.”

Across the country, subsidies for child care have [plummeted](#). In Arizona, the number of children covered [has dropped](#) by almost 75 percent since 2009, according to the Children’s Action Alliance. Only 15 states allow parents looking for work to qualify, according to the National Women’s Law Center.

“Child care is often listed as the No. 1 challenge that gets in the way of women’s work participation,” said Barbara Gault, vice president and executive director of the [Institute for Women’s Policy Research](#). Ms. Taylor said the home of the next-closest available sitter was a 30-minute drive away in the opposite direction of the interview, and she wasn’t sure if she had enough gasoline to make it.

She drove to Scottsdale, to an anonymous cluster of office buildings, and parked the car in the lot. There was no shade. It was 71 degrees. According to the police report, she left the boys strapped into their car seats, the tinted windows cracked, and the keys in the ignition with the fan blowing but the engine off.

About a half-hour later, two women heading to lunch walked past the car, heard crying and called 911. The boys were sweating and, according to a paramedic who responded, they “showed signs of heat distress,” the police report said, but were ultimately found to be unharmed.

The children had already been taken to a hospital when an officer saw a woman “running toward us with a panicked look on her face,” the report said. “She repeated to me how much she needed this job and that she had no other option but to leave her kids in the car so that she could attend the interview.”

A man at the Farmers Insurance office where Ms. Taylor had been interviewed said the office had no comment. Ms. Taylor said she had been offered the job. The police report does not mention the missing babysitter, saying only that Ms. Taylor told the authorities that she had been unable to find child care and had timed the interview to coincide with the children’s nap. On the advice of her lawyer, Ms. Taylor would not speak about her mind-set when she decided to leave the boys in the car.

Ms. Taylor was charged with two counts of felony child abuse, each with a maximum sentence of seven years. She pleaded not guilty. More than 55,000 people [signed a petition](#) asking the prosecutor to drop the charges. Unlike 19 other states, Arizona does not specify that leaving a child in a car is illegal, so the prosecutor has some discretion.

But leaving a child in a car in Arizona can be extremely dangerous. The police estimated that the temperature in the Durango when they found the children was more than 100 degrees. Mr. Montgomery’s office is handling three other cases — two fatal — in which children were left in cars, and he clearly wants to send a message to parents.

“I respect the fact that people want to be heard on what they think should occur in this case,” Mr. Montgomery said at a news conference in April. “But I’ll point out that not a single communication that’s come into this office as of yet has mentioned at all the position that those two young children were put in. Everything has focused on the mother.”

According to KidsandCars.org, about 38 children die from heat stroke in cars every year. [Janette Fennell](#), the founder of KidsandCars, said that there were too many variables to tell how a long an infant could survive in a hot car — including such things as how hydrated the baby was at the time. But even though the organization lobbies to outlaw leaving children in cars, Ms. Fennell said that in Ms. Taylor’s case, “A felony sounds pretty severe.”

Ms. Taylor’s lawyer has said that his client is not a criminal, but the victim of an economic system. “She was arrested for trying to get a job,” he said. “She wasn’t going to a liquor store. She wasn’t going to a party. She was going to a job interview.”

Mr. Montgomery, the prosecutor, has resisted this narrative of economic privation. Because Ms. Taylor listed an address — her parents' — on her court papers, the prosecutor says she was not homeless. And because she listed a part-time job — the very part-time office aide job — she was not unemployed.

Ms. Taylor has no prior felonies. Reports that her younger son had tested positive for drugs when he was born were incorrect, according to a spokeswoman for Arizona Child Protective Services, which is not permitted to volunteer information but only to confirm or clarify information given by others. The spokeswoman said Ms. Taylor's doctor had reported that she tested positive for an illegal drug while she was pregnant, and she confirmed Ms. Taylor's account that the drug was marijuana. Ms. Taylor said the test was taken on the day she learned that she was two months pregnant. The spokeswoman could not confirm the date of the test.

Now Ms. Taylor acknowledges that leaving the children in the car was a mistake, one that was particularly difficult to speak about with her daughter, whom she has always warned to avoid jail at all costs. "I had to explain to her, well, I did something wrong, that's why I had to go," she said.

'I Stay Inside and I Cry'

On March 30, Ms. Taylor walked out of jail as a controversial figure, provoking sympathy and condemnation by turns. With a possible felony conviction overshadowing her, her job prospects were even slimmer than before. Far worse, in her mind, she was not allowed to see her children, who were being cared for by a relative.

During the day, when they were not home, she would drop off clothes and diapers for them. Some evenings, she spoke to them by telephone. Anticipating that she would be required to take parenting classes, she put in a request to begin them at once. A few days after her interview with The Times, a judge gave her permission to visit the children for the first time in more than two months.

For the first time in years, on the other hand, Ms. Taylor had no financial worries. More than \$100,000 had been contributed to her cause.

"People ask me all the time, 'Are you happier now?' They feel that I should be over the moon," she said. "When, truth be told, I stay inside and I cry because I don't have my children." The money will be used to create a stable home and benefit the children, said Ms. Taylor and her lawyer, who is working pro bono. The next hearing is in July.

In the meantime, the ordeal has persuaded Ms. Taylor and Mr. Duncan to make another go of things, and they said they have been seeing a couples counselor.

"This is one of those eye-opening situations that makes you feel like that there are some things that are bigger than yourself, so sometimes you have to learn to communicate in order to make life better," Ms. Taylor said. "Because, I mean, I understand that a two-parent household is better than a one-parent household, and they love their dad to death; it's 'Daddy' all day. So it's letting go of your own notions of how things are supposed to go."

Ms. Taylor has also rented and furnished a modest three-bedroom house. It's easy to see where most of her energy has gone: Her daughter's room is decorated in many shades of pink, with flower-shaped pillows on the bed and a pink desk set. For the boys, there is a Disney theme and a rug printed with a roadway for toy cars. In the closet waits a row of little outfits on child-size hangers.

Ms. Taylor is waiting, too, not just for her children to come home, but for her life to restart. She is particularly impatient to start college again.

"Ten dollars an hour is basically going to keep me broke, keep me dependent on food stamps and Medicare and things like that," she said. "I don't want to live like that forever. I want to get out and do something bigger and better and be self-sustaining."

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