Social inequality leads to gap in US life expectancy

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A series of recent reports highlights the magnitude of social distress confronting tens of millions of ordinary working people in the United States as the impact of the economic downturn and growing gap between the super-rich and the rest of the population hits home.

Perhaps the sharpest example of the class divide that permeates American society is a report by researchers at the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which found "large and growing" disparities in life expectancy that coincide with the growth of social inequality over the last two decades.

The *New York Times* cited a report based on earlier findings by an HHS demographer and a professor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, which found "widening socioeconomic inequalities in life expectancy" at birth and at every age level.

On average, US life expectancy rose by three years (from 73.7 to 76.7) between 1980 and 2000, but the largest gains were made by the most affluent layers of the population, leading to a growing gap in life expectancy between the lower and higher income groups.

Dr. Gopal Singh and Professor Mohammed Siahpush measured social and economic conditions in every US county by examining 2000 census data on education, income, poverty, housing and other factors.

The report said in 1980-1982, people in the most affluent group could expect to live 2.8 years longer than those in the poorest (75.8 versus 73 years). By 1998-2000, the difference in life expectancy had increased to 4.5 years (79.2 versus 74.7), and it continues to grow, Dr. Singh said.

"Life expectancy was higher for the most affluent in 1980 than for the most deprived group in 2000," he said. "If you look at the extremes in 2000," Dr. Singh added, "men in the most deprived counties had 10 years' shorter life expectancy than women in the most affluent counties (71.5 versus 81.3 years)."

The *Times* said while that while researchers differ over what causes the disparity, many suggest it includes the lack of health insurance among lower-income people, which makes them less likely to receive checkups, screenings, diagnostic tests, prescription drugs and other types of care. It is estimated that some 47 million Americans lack health care coverage.

In addition, higher income and more educated people have greater access to new medical advances to fight cancer and heart disease, while lower-income people continue to smoke at a disproportionately higher level, live in less safe neighborhoods, have less access to healthy foods and are subjected to increased levels of stress. A recent study by the US Department of Veteran Affairs also found that racial discrimination led to "less aggressive medical care" for minorities.

Nancy Krieger, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, has found that trends in life expectancy have paralleled the decrease or increase in social inequality over the last four decades. Kreiger ,who investigated the rate of premature mortality—dying before the age of 65—and infant death from 1960 to 2002, told the *Times* that inequities shrank between 1966 and 1980, but then widened over the next 20 years.

"The recent trend of growing disparities in health status is not inevitable," she said. "From 1966 to 1980, socioeconomic disparities declined in tandem with a decline in mortality rates." She said the creation of Medicaid and Medicare—the two major federal programs for the poor and elderly—along with health centers, the social programs under President Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had likely contributed to narrowing the earlier inequalities in health.

The dismantling of these programs—by both Republican and Democratic administrations—over the last three decades, and the radical redistribution of wealth to the top that has resulted, has produced a catastrophe for masses of people, including cutting their years of life.

The report on life expectancy coincided with a rash of new data detailing the widespread suffering caused by the loss of jobs, the collapse of the housing market and the combination of inflation and stagnating or declining wages. The reports noted the following:

* By the end of 2007, 36 percent of consumers' disposable income went to food, energy and medical care, a bigger portion than at any time since records were first kept in 1960, according to Merrill Lynch.

* An analysis of government data by the *Washington Post* found that prices for basic staples like groceries, gasoline and health care have risen 9.2 percent since 2006. This means a family of four, which made $45,000 a year, is spending an extra $972 annually, assuming it did not cut back on such items because of higher prices. During that same period average earnings for non-managerial workers rose by only 5 percent, translating into a de facto wage cut for tens of millions of Americans.

Middle-income families are being forced to spend $378 more per year on gasoline and an extra $38 on fuel oil. The price for dairy products has risen 15 percent since 2006, fruit and vegetable prices are up 10 percent, and cereals and bakery products are up 8 percent.

* Even though productivity is increasing, inflation-adjusted median family income has fallen 2.6 percent since 2001—chopping nearly $1,000 off a family's yearly income.

The fall in wages has in part been caused by rising medical costs, which has led employers to offer smaller pay raises. At the same time wages have been eroded by rising medical costs and efforts by corporations to impose greater out-of-pocket expenses on employees. Since 2001, premiums for family health care coverage have increased 78 percent, according to a 2007 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation cited by the *Washington Post*.

* Food stamp rolls have reached a record high in Ohio, with 1.1 million people—or 10 percent of the state's population—receiving federal subsidies, according to the state welfare agency. Caseloads have nearly doubled since 2001, when an estimated 628,000 people were in the program, according to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

"The economy and loss of manufacturing jobs are at the root of what's going on," Jack Frech, director of the welfare agency in Athens County in southeast Ohio, told the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. "But lately," he added, it's "the rising cost of transportation and food—people who were barely getting by, are not getting by. It has pressed folks to the edge to have to rely on food stamps."

In most cases families are eligible for $100 a month in food stamps if they make up to 130 percent of the federal poverty level—$22,880 for a family of three—and have assets no greater than $2,000. Poverty experts say another 500,000 residents in the state are eligible for the program but are not enrolled.

All of these reports depict an unfolding social calamity in the US. In the face of this, both candidates for the Democratic Party presidential nomination—Illinois Senator Barack Obama and New York Senator Hillary Clinton—have proposed less than half-measures to address the collapse of the housing market, the destruction of decent-paying jobs and the health care crisis.

In an address at the University of Pennsylvania on Monday, Clinton called on President Bush to appoint "an emergency working group on foreclosures" to recommend new ways to confront housing finance troubles. She said the panel should be led by financial experts such as Robert Rubin, treasury secretary in her husband's administration, former Federal Reserve chairmen Alan Greenspan, and Paul Volcker.

All of these figures are implicated in economic policies over the last three decades that channeled trillions of dollars into the hands of the richest segments of the population through the destruction of some 6 million industrial jobs and the permanent lowering of working class living standards.

Obama is just as opposed as Clinton to any radical redistribution of wealth from the top to bottom. While proposing "middle class" tax breaks, which will hardly make a dent in the disaster facing working families, he has rejected any return to the tax rates on the rich that prevailed in the 1960s—a period when social inequality actually lessened somewhat—saying last year he was opposed to "confiscatory taxes that get in the way of economic growth."