

The social crisis in the US and the 2012 elections

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Three and a half years into the economic crisis, the conditions of life facing millions of people in the US are disastrous. Whatever the talk of an economic “recovery,” poverty, perpetual unemployment, impossible levels of debt pervade American society.

One recent report provides a stark portrait of the “third world” conditions in broad swaths of the country. According to the report, on life expectancy, preschoolers in many areas can expect to live no longer than children in some of the most impoverished countries in the world. In hundreds of counties, these rates have either shown no improvement or worsened.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), based at the University of Washington, compiled data on every county in the US, calculating life expectancy each year from 1989 through 2009 and comparing county life expectancies to those in other countries worldwide. There is little doubt that the conditions of life for many of the areas with the lowest life expectancies are worse now than the last year included in the study, 2009.

The institute’s findings are alarming in two respects. Not only have improvements in US life expectancy lagged behind those in Western Europe, Scandinavia, Australia, Japan and elsewhere, but there are vast disparities from county to county in how long Americans can expect to live—sometimes varying by as much as 16 years.

In 2009, the average life expectancy for US men was 76.2 years, up 4.6 years since 1989. Life expectancy for women rose only 2.7 years over this same period, to 81.3 years. But IHME’s William Heisel commented that these modest changes were “not a great improvement. That’s far behind the countries that are doing the best.”

How long a child born in 2009 can expect to live

varies dramatically depending on his or her place of birth. In Marin County, California, with a median household income of \$91,792 in 2009, men can expect to live to 81.6 years. But in Quitman and Tunica counties in Mississippi, male life expectancy is just 66 years—comparable to Pakistan. Median household income for these two counties was \$24,491 and \$27,218, respectively, in 2009.

While life expectancy for women in Collier County, Florida stood at 85.8 years in 2009, women in McDowell, West Virginia could only expect to live to 74 years, about the same as in Algeria. Again, the difference in life expectancy corresponded to a disparity in median household income—\$52,988 in Collier and \$21,474 in McDowell.

In the Kansas City metropolitan area, comparisons of life expectancies by county demonstrate a growing social divide. The Kansas City (Missouri) Health Department tracked life expectancy by city ZIP codes and found one with a life expectancy of 85 years and another with only 69 years—a staggering difference of 16 years.

The IHME research shows that the biggest drivers of health disparities—and hence preventable causes of death—include tobacco use, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity and alcohol abuse. Such deaths, however, are only “preventable” to the extent that the health care system works to prevent these conditions in the first place, and that there is proper medical intervention to treat them if they develop.

In fact, pervasive poverty, stress over working conditions, lost jobs, foreclosures and mounting household debt are contributing factors to deteriorating health for millions of US families—a situation that has worsened as a result of the recession. As the WSWS reports in the series “Hunger stalks America,” one in

six Americans—or about 50 million people—now struggle with hunger and are turning to food banks in record numbers.

In the face of what can only be described as a health crisis, Americans actually made fewer visits to the doctor last year, declining by almost 5 percent compared to 2010, as many people struggle to pay for health care. They were also issued fewer prescriptions. (See “Americans cut back on doctor visits, prescriptions”) This is due in large part to workers and their families losing employer-sponsored health insurance as a result of long-term unemployment.

It is striking that the massive social crisis reflected in these figures is not even palely reflected in the 2012 presidential election campaign of the two big business parties. Widespread poverty, unemployment and the deteriorating conditions of life for the vast majority of Americans—these are simply non-issues as far as the political establishment is concerned.

In an earlier period, the ruling class felt compelled to at least acknowledge mass poverty and unemployment, if only in a limited way. The “War on Poverty” initiated by President Lyndon Johnson during his 1964 state of the union address—which ultimately led to the establishment of Medicare, Medicaid and other government reforms—appears like alien phenomenon in the current political atmosphere. It has been replaced by a war on these very programs, as the presidential contenders vie for their credentials as the preferred candidate of the financial elite.

The supposed “debate” between the two big business parties is in fact a fraud. Whoever wins, the ruling class is preparing an attack on social programs, including health care, that will go far beyond the measures implemented so far. Congressional Democrats have indicated that following the elections they will begin drafting budget-cutting legislation that could slash over \$5 trillion from the federal deficit over 10 years.

In opposition to these policies, the Socialist Equality Party advances a program that defends the interests of working people. We say that the only way to defend jobs and living standards—and to fight against the growth of poverty and the explosion of social inequality—is to fight for a socialist program. One of the first tasks of a workers government based on this program would be to put an end to poverty and income inequality.

The task is to establish a society, on a world scale, in which the issues that determine the organization and operation of the economy are not the speculative interests of a parasitic financial aristocracy, but the basic needs of the working class. This requires that the working class take political power and place economic forces of society under democratic control and according to a scientific plan.

The SEP is running Jerry White for president and Phyllis Scherrer for vice president to build a mass popular movement in the working class to oppose the two big business parties and the profit system they defend. We urge all workers and young people to consider our program and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.

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