

# Inequality, class and life expectancy in America

Barry Grey  
15 February 2016

A study by Brookings Institution economists released Friday documents a sharp increase in life span divergences between the rich and the poor in America. The report, based on an analysis of Census Bureau and Social Security Administration data, concludes that for men born in 1950, the gap in life expectancy between the top 10 percent of wage earners and the bottom 10 percent is more than double the gap for their counterparts born in 1920.

For those born in 1920, there was a six-year differential between rich and poor. For those born in 1950, that difference had reached 14 years. For women, the gap grew from 4.7 years to 13 years, almost tripling.

Overall, life expectancy for the bottom 10 percent improved by just 3 percent for men born in 1950 over those born in 1920. For the top 10 percent, it soared by about 28 percent.

Life expectancy for the bottom 10 percent of male wage earners born in 1950 rose by less than one year compared to that for male workers born 40 years earlier—to 73.6 from 72.9. But for the top 10 percent, life expectancy leapt to 87.2 from 79.1.

The United States ranks among the worst so-called rich countries when it comes to life expectancy. But its low ranking is entirely due to the poor health and high mortality of low-income Americans. According to the Social Security Administration, life expectancy for the wealthiest US men at age 60 was just below the rates for Iceland and Japan, two countries with the highest levels. Americans in the bottom quarter of the wage scale, on the other hand, ranked just above Poland and the Czech Republic.

Life-expectancy is the most basic indicator of social well-being. The minimal increase for low-income workers and the widening disparity between the poor

and the rich is a stark commentary on the immense growth of social inequality and class polarization in the United States. It underscores the fact that socioeconomic class is the fundamental category of social life under capitalism—one that conditions every aspect of life, including its length.

The Brookings Institution findings shed further light on the catastrophic decline in the social position of the American working class. They follow recent reports showing a sharp rise in death rates for both young and middle-aged white workers, primarily due to drug abuse, alcoholism and suicide. Other recent reports have shown a dramatic decline in life expectancy for poorer middle-aged Americans and a reversal of decades of declining infant mortality.

It is no mystery what is behind this vast social retrogression. It is the product of the decay of American capitalism and a four-decade-long offensive by the ruling elite against the working class. From Reagan to the Obama administration, Democrats and Republicans alike have overseen a corporate-government assault on the jobs, wages, pensions and health benefits of working people.

The ruling elite has dismantled the bulk of the country's industrial infrastructure, destroying decent-paying jobs by the millions, and turned to the most parasitic and criminal forms of financial speculation as the main source of its profit and private wealth. Untold trillions have been squandered to finance perpetual war and the maniacal self-enrichment of the top 1 percent and 0.1 percent.

The basic infrastructure of the country has been starved of funds and left to rot, to the point where uncounted millions of people are being poisoned with lead and other toxins from corroded water systems. Flint, Michigan is just the tip of the iceberg.

Under Obama, this social counterrevolution has been intensified. The financial meltdown of 2008 has been utilized by the same forces that precipitated the crash to carry through a reordering of social relations aimed at reversing every social gain won by the working class in the course of a century of struggle. A central target of the attack is health care for working people.

Obamacare is the spearhead of a worked-out strategy to reduce the quantity and quality of health care available to workers and reorganize the health care system directly on a class basis. Corporate and government costs are to be slashed by gutting employer-paid health care, forcing workers individually to buy expensive, bare-bones plans from the insurance monopolies, and rationing drugs, tests and medical procedures to make them inaccessible to workers.

The rise in mortality for workers and the widening of the life span gap between rich and poor are not simply the outcome of impersonal economic forces. In corporate boardrooms, think tanks and state agencies, the ruling class is working to lower working class life expectancy. In late 2013, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank with the closest ties to the Pentagon and the CIA, published two policy papers decrying the “waste” of money on health care for the elderly. The clear message was that ordinary people were living much too long and diverting resources needed by the military to wage war around the world.

The social and economic chasm in America finds a political expression in the vast disconnect between the entire political establishment and the masses of working people. Neither party nor any of their presidential candidates, the self-described “socialist” Bernie Sanders included, can seriously address the real state of social conditions or offer a serious program to address the crisis.

In his final State of the Union Address last month, Obama presented an absurd picture of a resurgent economy. “The United States of America, right now,” he declared, “has the strongest, most durable economy in the world... Anyone claiming that America’s economy is in decline is peddling fiction.”

In the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton and Sanders are seeking to outdo one another in seizing the mantle of the Obama administration and praising its supposed social and

economic achievements.

They cannot address the real conditions facing the masses of working people because they defend the capitalist system, which is the source of the social disaster. The remedy must be based on an understanding of the disease. It is the building of an independent socialist and revolutionary movement uniting the entire working class, in the US and around the world.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**