

# Life expectancy declines for white Americans

Patrick Martin  
21 April 2016

It seems that each week brings new information documenting the precipitous decline in the conditions of life for a large majority of the American people. Yet in all of the media commentary on the mood of anger expressed in the convulsive 2016 election campaign, little is said about the profound and worsening social crisis that is fueling it.

On Wednesday came a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) analyzing data on deaths recorded in the United States in 2014. The CDC found that life expectancy for whites has begun to drop, with a more pronounced decline for women than for men.

The actual year-on-year change from 2013 to 2014 may seem small, with life expectancy at birth for whites falling from 78.9 years to 78.8 years, but the direction of the change is in and of itself shocking. As Dr. Elizabeth Arias, author of the report, notes, “The trend in life expectancy at birth has been one of improvement since national estimates were first published with 1900 data.”

After more than a century of rising life expectancy, interrupted only briefly by World War II and the worst year of the AIDS epidemic, life expectancy for whites remained constant in 2012 and 2013, and then declined in 2014. Life expectancy for the entire US population remained unchanged because there was a slight improvement for African-Americans, Hispanics and other minorities.

Dr. Arias told the *New York Times* that the decline in life expectancy was largely the result of increased death rates for white men and women from their mid-20s to their mid-50s, the prime years of adulthood, when death rates are typically quite low. “The increase in death in this segment of the population was great enough to affect life expectancy at birth for the whole group,” she said. “That is very unusual.”

While categorized in racial terms by the study, what

is expressed in such figures is the consequences of class warfare. Other studies have shown a shocking divergence in life expectancy between poorer and wealthier Americans. The impact of decades of deindustrialization, and the social ills produced by it, is reflected in one of the most basic indicators of social well-being.

Drug overdoses, liver disease (much of it a byproduct of alcoholism and drug abuse) and suicide are the main causes of these premature deaths. Addiction to prescription opioids like OxyContin is a major factor: Americans comprise 5 percent of the world’s population but consume 80 percent of prescription opioids.

According to an analysis of health data by the *Washington Post* published April 10, the death rate for rural white women in their 40s has risen by 30 percent since 2000, and by nearly 50 percent since 1990. In 30 counties in the rural South, middle-aged white women now have a higher mortality rate than black women of the same age.

Summing up the overall dimensions of the crisis in life expectancy, the *Post* wrote: “Compared with a scenario in which mortality rates for whites continued to fall steadily after 1998, roughly 650,000 people have died prematurely since 1999—around 450,000 men and nearly 200,000 women. That number nearly equals the death toll of the American Civil War.”

The contradictions of American capitalism find expression not solely in the dismal indices of declining social well-being, but also in an increasingly militant, angry and politically radical mood in the working class. Vulnerable individuals may fall victim to social evils like drug abuse and suicide, but the class as a whole will seek to find a way out of the crisis on the road of struggle.

Those struggles that have broken out over the past year have immediately come into conflict with the trade

unions, which function as part of the police apparatus of corporate America for suppressing the working class. From the oil workers' strike of early 2015 to the rank-and-file rejection by autoworkers of sellout contracts accepted by the UAW to the current protests and strikes by teachers and the Verizon walkout, workers are confronting the necessity of breaking through the straitjacket of the unions and their alliance with the Democratic Party, and adopting a new political perspective.

In the 2016 presidential campaign, the social anger has been reflected in support for nominally anti-establishment candidates in both big business parties—the real estate mogul Donald Trump on the right and, more broadly, the self-described “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders on the left.

Sanders presents himself as an opponent of Wall Street greed and the “billionaire class,” but his main purpose is to divert the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment in the working class and among young people back into the suffocating confines of the Democratic Party. He has pledged to back Hillary Clinton if and when she wins the nomination.

While the outcome of the primary campaign is not settled, the New York primaries have increased the chances that Trump will secure the Republican nomination and Clinton will win the Democratic race. This “choice” is itself a demonstration of the complete dead end of the capitalist two-party system.

Clinton—the former first lady, senator from New York and secretary of state—is the personification of the corrupt status quo. Together with her husband, she has raked in \$140 million since leaving the White House in 2001.

Clinton's likely opponent is a billionaire demagogue who became a celebrity through real estate manipulations, casinos and a reality TV show, and now engages in fascistic rants against immigrants, Muslims and women, while encouraging violence against those who protest against his racist rhetoric. Trump's main contender, Texas Senator Ted Cruz, meanwhile, is a favorite of the Tea Party and the Christian right, who advocates the privatization of Social Security and the carpet bombing of Iraq and Syria.

None of these candidates can offer any policies to address the catastrophic conditions affecting ever broader sections of the American people. These

conditions are rooted in the insoluble crisis of American and world capitalism, which both parties defend. Regardless of who wins the election in November, the ensuing months will see an intensification of austerity and attacks on democratic rights at home and militarism and war abroad.

The initial growth of social opposition and working class consciousness reflected in the elections underscores the urgent need for a genuine socialist and internationalist perspective to guide the coming struggles of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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