

Study documents sharp increase in alcohol abuse in the US

Trévon Austin
14 August 2017

A recent study published by JAMA Psychiatry found large increases in diagnosed alcohol use disorders and abuse, with one in eight Americans suffering from alcohol abuse. According to the researchers, “substantial increases in alcohol use, high-risk drinking, and DSM-IV alcohol use disorder constitute a public health crisis and portend increases in chronic disease in the United States, especially among women, older adults, racial/ethnic minorities, and the socioeconomically disadvantaged.”

The study compares data gathered between 2001-2002 and 2012-2013, showing 12-month alcohol use increasing from 65.4 percent to 72.7 percent of Americans. High-risk drinking—defined as more than an average of four drinks a day, at least once a week for a year—increased from 9.7 percent to 12.6 percent. The data suggests that nearly 30 million Americans suffer from some form of alcohol abuse.

The sharp increases in alcohol abuse among particular segments of the population found by the JAMA study paint an even more grim picture. While the rise in alcohol abuse in women (84 percent) and African-Americans (92.8 percent) causes alarm, the rise in alcohol abuse by individuals over 65 (106.7 percent) paints a clearer portrayal of the situation. These are individuals who have lived long enough to experience the gradual decline of living standards in the United States. The workers who remember times of relative prosperity are most affected by the crisis of American society.

The most compelling explanations for the rise in alcohol consumption point to the fall in alcohol prices coupled with a decline in access to addiction treatment services. A 2016 Surgeon General report stated that only 10 percent of people suffering from drug abuse receive specialty treatment, a statistic obviously

correlated with the lack of access to health care.

A 2013 study published in *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* estimated that one drink per day of the cheapest brand of spirits cost the typical person 4.46 percent of their disposable income in 1950, but just 0.29 percent in 2011. This trend is similar among beer and wine.

Coupled with the ongoing opioid crisis, the latest research on alcohol abuse exposes the diseased nature of American society.

Medical professionals argue that the increase in “deaths of despair” (alcohol-related deaths, drug overdoses, and suicides) reflect deep issues in American society. Essentially, Americans are increasingly turning to drugs and alcohol, and in some cases suicide, to self-medicate.

According to reports from the National Center of Health Statistics, more than 500,000 Americans died from drug overdose between 2000 and 2015. In the same timeframe deaths involving direct health complications from alcohol rose from about 20,000 per year to over 33,000. Furthermore, an analysis of 2006-2010 statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that alcohol is linked to approximately 88,000 deaths a year.

The staggering number of deaths is a result of the catastrophic decline in living standards and the loss of decent paying jobs for millions of Americans. Studies earlier this year revealed that the real wages of workers have been on the decline for the last four decades.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis the Obama administration oversaw the implementation of austerity measures wherein billions of dollars were redirected into Wall Street, at the expense of social programs. While President Donald Trump and economists hail an official unemployment

rate of 4.3 percent, the real unemployment rate is 8.6 percent and the labor force participation rate remains at historic lows.

What is the American ruling class' solution to this public health crisis? It was not until late last week that President Trump declared the opioid crisis a national public health emergency, stating that "the opioid crisis is an emergency, and I am saying, officially, right now, it is an emergency. It's a national emergency... we're going to spend a lot of time, a lot of effort and a lot of money on the opioid crisis. It is a serious problem the likes of which we have never had."

If a significant amount of funding is actually allocated in attempts to combat the crisis, one can expect it go towards funding police forces and escalating the war on drugs. Last week Trump proposed that "the best way to prevent drug addiction and overdose is to prevent people from abusing drugs in the first place."

It was only a few years ago that President Barack Obama and the Democrats were portraying the implementation of the Affordable Care Act as a progressive measure that would improve the quality and access to health care for millions of Americans.

However, these studies reveal the reactionary character of the legislation popularly known as Obamacare. Access to health care has not improved for the working class, and 28.5 million Americans are still without health insurance.

A study issued on July 31 by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) found that uninsured people were twice as likely as those with health insurance to report prescription opioid misuse and also had higher rates of use disorders. Proposed cuts in Medicaid, Medicare, and other social programs will only exacerbate the issue.

The refusal and inability of the American ruling class to seriously address the social crisis spells further trouble for the working class. Both big business parties are committed to attacking democratic rights and clawing back the gains won by the working class over decades of bitter struggle.

While the Democrats are adamantly pursuing neo-McCarthyite allegations that Trump is in cahoots with Russian President Vladimir Putin in order to reorient foreign policy towards war with Russia, they are ignoring the health crisis ravaging the American

population and begging the Republicans to let them assist in "fixing" Obamacare.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact