

Drug deaths drive down US life expectancy for second year

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Two reports published yesterday by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reveal that the life expectancy of the American working class is declining due to an increase in drug overdoses and suicides.

The data reflects, in empirical terms, the social devastation wrought on the lives of millions of people by decades of bipartisan policies aimed at enriching the wealthy. The decline in life expectancy, a fundamental measure of social progress, is a historical milestone in the decline of American capitalism. This is the second year in a row that life expectancy has fallen in the US, marking the first time in nearly half a century that life expectancy has declined in consecutive years.

Life expectancy dropped from 78.7 years in 2015 to 78.6 years in 2016, driven by a 0.2-year decline from 76.3 to 76.1 years among men. Life expectancy for women remained at 81.1 years, as the gap between women and men reached an all-time high.

However, life expectancy for those who make it to old age continues to improve, and the mortality rates for heart disease, cancer, and other illnesses are declining as technological and medical advances improve the capacity to extend human life. The decline in life expectancy is caused by a dramatic increase in the mortality rate among those under age 44 who are overdosing, particularly on opioids, or taking their own lives.

The CDC report shows a 21 percent year-to-year increase in drug overdoses, which took the lives of 63,600 people in 2016. It is as if each year, a city the size of Palo Alto, California; Bismarck, North Dakota; or Fort Myers, Florida was killed off entirely. Since 2006, roughly 430,000 people have died of drug overdose, more than the number of US soldiers killed during World War II. An army of people who should be alive today is not.

A total of 42,249 people died from opioid overdoses in 2016, a 28 percent increase from the year before. While Barack Obama was traveling the country on behalf of Hillary Clinton, proclaiming, “America is already great,” 115 people were dying each day from opioids alone.

Corporations have been flooding poor areas with pills and are shielded from prosecution by the government. Between 2007 and 2012, for example, drug distributor Miami-Luken shipped 11 million doses of oxycodone and hydrocodone into Mingo County, West Virginia, which has a population of 25,000.

Former Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) official Joe Rannazzisi told *60 Minutes* in October that it is “a fact” that companies inundate poor areas with the knowledge that many will die as a result. While lawsuits against the drug companies have forced paltry penalties of several million dollars, this is part of the cost of doing business. The Obama administration slashed the number of DEA cases against drug distributors by 69.5 percent between 2011 and 2014.

The decline in life expectancy and the increase in drug overdoses are the product of a massive growth in social inequality. Daniel Kim, a professor at Northeastern University, told Reuters yesterday that “what we know from numerous health studies is that a wider gap between the rich and the poor means that more people will die unnecessarily.”

Over the past 40 years, the Democratic and Republican parties have been engaged in a conscious strategy to pare back the gains won by the working class through the social struggles of the early 20th century. A bipartisan cabal has slashed wages, eliminated pensions, cut social programs, reduced taxes on the rich, and done away with employer-provided healthcare.

In the process, the government has transferred trillions from the working class into the bank accounts of the financial elite. Today, the top 10 percent owns 77 percent of the wealth. The richest 3 billionaires own as much as the poorest 160 million—half the country’s population.

The social counterrevolution was intensified under the Democratic administration of Barack Obama, which oversaw the bailout of the banks following the 2008 financial crisis, conducted the bailouts of the auto industry that slashed the wages of autoworkers to historic lows, and enforced the Detroit bankruptcy. The enactment of Obamacare has coincided with a drastic increase in the number of drug overdose deaths. While the rate per 100,000 of overdoses was increasing by 3 percent from 2006 to 2014, it began increasing by 18 percent per year in 2014, the year Obamacare came into force.

The death rate will continue to rise as the Trump administration deepens tax cuts for the wealthy. Citing Kim’s research, Reuters wrote, “the income inequality produced by the [tax bill] will mean 29,689 more deaths each year, perhaps more.” Billions in cuts to Medicare, mandated by laws that require budget cuts to match drops in revenue, will lead to the deaths of thousands more.

The victims of the opioid crisis come from all regions and social backgrounds, but the overwhelming majority of those killed are poor and working class. According to last year’s CDC data, 90 percent were white, and most were men, with overdoses for whites roughly triple the rate for African-Americans and double the rate for Latinos. The Native American overdose rate equals the rate for whites.

This reality exposes the reactionary lies advanced by Black Lives Matter and its claims of “white supremacy,” and by the #MeToo movement, which asserts that society is organized on the principle of patriarchy and male domination.

New York Times contributor and racial politics proponent Michael Eric Dyson recently attempted to turn the opioid crisis into an example of white privilege when he said in March 2017, “White brothers and sisters have been medicalized in terms of their trauma and addiction. Black and brown people have been criminalized for their trauma and addiction.”

Seething with contempt for the working class, Dyson

ignores the fact that if adequate medical services *were* available, tens of thousands would not die each year from drug overdose. Instead of helping the victims, state governments have responded by calling in the National Guard to police the streets (West Virginia) and by calling for the quadrupling of jail terms for opioid users (New Jersey). Meanwhile, both parties voted to increase military spending by \$80 billion over last year’s levels.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for expropriating the billions of dollars the drug companies have made from the ongoing crisis. This money, and the personal wealth of the corporate and financial aristocracy, must be put into an emergency fund to pay for the immediate construction of a network of hospitals and health clinics, staffed with well-trained doctors, to provide permanent, free medical care to all those effected.

Rehabilitation centers must be expanded and new ones built so that the millions with addiction and dependency problems can seek help free of charge. A 90 percent tax must be imposed on all income above five million dollars to provide funds for massive jobs and public works programs in those areas hardest hit by the crisis to alleviate inequality and poverty.

These demands can be met only through the building of a mass movement of the working class, independent of the Democratic and Republican parties, aimed at linking workers of all races and nationalities in a common fight against the capitalist system.



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