

Report exposes rise in alcohol-related deaths among Millennials in US

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A study published last Wednesday in the *British Medical Journal* exposes the devastating and long-lasting impact of the 2008 economic crisis on the rise of deaths related to alcoholism, cirrhosis and liver cancer among 25- to 34-year-olds within the United States. The increase is one part of a rising number of “deaths of despair” caused by suicide and drug and alcohol abuse, which have contributed to declining life expectancy in the US.

The study, entitled “Mortality due to cirrhosis and liver cancer in the United States, 1999-2016: observational study,” was written by University of Michigan Medical School assistant professor and liver specialist Dr. Elliot Tapper and fellow professor Dr. Neehar Parikh. The two liver specialists drew extensively from federal data in death certificates and from the US Census Bureau.

The report’s findings include a decline in cirrhosis-related deaths among a number of subgroups within the population between 1999 and 2008 followed by a reversal of this process among nearly all groups between 2009 and 2016. This data is particularly shocking since medical treatment for leading causes of cirrhosis, a condition where the liver does not function properly due to damage, such as hepatitis C, have been developed. As a result, the growth in cirrhosis has largely come from alcoholic liver disease and non-alcoholic liver disease.

The total number of deaths from cirrhosis was 460,760 throughout the entire period covered in the report, with the annual total increasing by 65 percent from 1999 to 2016. The authors note, “Deaths due to cirrhosis are expected to triple by 2030.”

According to the study 25- to 34-year-olds were particularly hard-hit and experienced the highest average annual percentage change in death from

cirrhosis, increasing by 10.5 percent in the period between 2009 to 2016. It also clarified that whites and Native Americans had the most rapid increase in mortalities compared to other identified ethnic groups.

There was also a 2.1 percent increase in deaths caused by hepatocellular carcinoma, a form of liver cancer, over the period covered in the study. Similar to cirrhosis, deaths from hepatocellular carcinoma should have likely decreased since the principle cause—hepatitis B—is easily treatable. Unlike cirrhosis, however, deaths from hepatocellular carcinoma had been on the decline among younger sections of the population but have risen among individuals older than 55.

The authors explicitly state that the rise in cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma is likely caused by the devastating conditions facing workers and youth. They note in the study, “Given that worsening trends began after 2008, a year marked by the global financial crisis and a subsequent economic recession in the USA, a differential economic impact on specific states may explain some of the results.” They also note that rise in both cirrhosis and liver cancer is disproportionately impacting young men compared to older women, which would back up their claim that it was related to economic instability.

“We hypothesize that there may be a loss of opportunity, and the psychological burden that comes with that may have driven some of those patients to abusive drinking,” Parikh told NPR.

Other physicians have concurred with the study’s findings, such as liver specialist Dr. Sumeet Asrani, who noted, “It fits with what we see in practice. We’re seeing younger and younger patients with alcoholic liver disease.”

The development of cirrhosis at such a young age,

however, reflects the devastation of an entire generation of young workers that do not see a future for themselves, or feel that their only escape from their difficulties is through drugs or alcohol.

A recent *British Medical Journal* editorial pointed out that more than 64,000 people died in 2015 from drug overdose, with a 137 percent increase in fatalities from drugs between 2000 to 2014. This is the outcome of the opioid crisis that is devastating large sections of the US, which is the direct result of deindustrialization and a conscious policy of pharmaceutical companies flooding impoverished areas with cheap pills.

Similar sentiments of despair find expression in the rise of suicides among 10- to 19-year-olds by more than 12 percent between 2013 and 2016. Suicide rates have also increased among the general population by 25 percent between 1996 and 2016, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The rise in suicides and drug and alcohol related deaths is a stark indictment of the entire capitalist system and its failure to provide opportunities for a new layer of youth as they are starting their adult life. These failures have found a depressing expression in the last period is due largely to the artificial suppression of the class struggle by the pro-company unions. The eruption of mass workers struggles will allow this dissatisfaction to find a progressive expression as young workers and students take up the fight for jobs and decent living standards.



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