

The US mortality crisis: CDC reports extraordinary drop in life expectancy

Trévon Austin
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Life expectancy in the United States continued its extraordinary decline in 2017 after stagnating in 2016 and falling in 2015. Not since the combined impact of World War I and the Spanish Flu in 1918 has the country experienced such a prolonged period of decline in life expectancy.

The annual mortality report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) highlights the disastrous impact of the social crisis on the American working class. Suicides and drug overdoses, what have been termed deaths of despair, have been identified as the driving forces behind the continuing decline in how long Americans are expected to live.

In 2017, over 2.8 million Americans died, an increase by approximately 70,000 from the previous year and the most deaths in a single year since the US government began keeping records. From 2016 to 2017, the age-adjusted death rate for the entire population increased by 0.4 percent.

The average life expectancy in the US declined from 78.7 to 78.6 years. Life expectancy dropped for males from 76.2 to 76.1 but remained the same for females at 81.1. Life expectancy for females has consistently been higher than males and the gap continues to widen. In 2017, the difference in life expectancy between females and males increased 0.1 year from 4.9 years in 2016 to 5.0 years in 2017.

Age-specific death rates between 2016 and 2017 increased for age groups 25–34, 35–44, and 85 and over. These statistics indicate a healthcare system failing the elderly and a societal crisis ravaging younger workers. Deaths of despair, including alcoholism, are a leading cause of deaths in younger ages groups.

The US suicide death rate rose to the highest in 50 years last year. Since 2008, it has ranked as the 10th leading cause of death for all ages in the US. In 2016, suicide became the second leading cause of death for ages 10–34

and the fourth leading cause for ages 35–54. From 1999 to 2017, suicide rates have increased for both males and females, with the greatest yearly increases occurring since 2006.

The average annual increase in suicide rates shifted from about one percent per year from 1999 through 2006 to two percent per year from 2006 through 2017. The age-adjusted rate of suicide among females increased from 4.0 per 100,000 in 1999 to 6.1 in 2017, while the rate for males increased from 17.8 to 22.4.

The study also focuses on suicide in depressed rural regions. In 1999, the suicide rate in rural counties was 1.4 times the rate of most urban areas. The rate in rural areas was 13.1 per 100,000 with urban areas having a rate of 9.6 per 100,000. The difference further increased in 2017 with the suicide rate for the most rural counties (20.0 per 100,000) increasing to 1.8 times the rate for the most urban counties (11.1).

The rate in drug overdoses has skyrocketed in the same period. From 1999 to 2017, the overdose rate soared from 6.1 per 100,000 to 21.7 per 100,000. The rate increased by an average of 10 percent per year from 1999 to 2006, by 3 percent per year from 2006 to 2014, and a staggering 16 percent per year from 2014 to 2017. The rise coincides with the opioid crisis ravaging through parts of the US, concentrated in West Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

The figures contained in the latest CDC report are a reflection of the diseased nature of American society and the failure of the capitalist system. The last decade has seen a historic rise in social inequality in the aftermath of the economic crash of 2008 and the bailout of Wall Street, overseen by Obama and the Democrats, which saw the greatest transfer of wealth in history from the working class to the rich.

Low-wage, tenuous employment, where it is available, has replaced the jobs that were destroyed in the process. The boondoggle that is known as Obamacare, far from

providing the population with healthcare, has funneled billions of dollars to the healthcare industry and increased corporate profits by compelling workers to buy substandard health insurance out of their own pocket.

CDC director Robert R. Redfield lamented over the implications of his organization's report: "The latest CDC data show that the US life expectancy has declined over the past few years. Tragically, this troubling trend is largely driven by deaths from drug overdose and suicide," he said in a press release.

"Life expectancy gives us a snapshot of the Nation's overall health and these sobering statistics are a wakeup call that we are losing too many Americans, too early and too often, to conditions that are preventable."

As indicated by the prevalence of suicide in rural regions, joblessness and social isolation reap a terrible toll. Workers are driven to despair under the ruling class assault against the living standards won by the working class in the 20th century.

There is no solution to the continued decline in life expectancy forthcoming from the ruling class. In reality, the increased death rates are seen as the cost of doing business, necessary to funnel ever greater sums of money into the pockets of robber barons like Jeff Bezos and fuel unprecedented spending on the US military.

A socialist response is required to meet the needs of the working class. A direct assault must be launched on the wealth of the corporate and financial elite. The wealth of the one percent must be expropriated to fund universal healthcare and turn the giant pharmaceutical companies into publicly-owned utilities.

The decades-long campaign to strip workers of their social gains must be reversed. Society must be transformed to ensure that every person has access to high quality healthcare, education and housing, and ensure the right to a high-paying job and leisure. Above all, this requires the building of a mass working class movement independent of both big business parties, fighting for socialism.



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