

New study shows link between auto plant closures and opioid deaths in working class America

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A scientific study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* online this week found a direct link between auto assembly plant closures and the growing opioid epidemic in the United States.

The authors, led by Atheendar S. Venkataramani of the University of Pennsylvania, established a staggering 85 percent increase in opioid deaths above expected levels within five years in counties which experienced a plant closure.

The study represents an important contribution to an understanding of the relationship between the economic devastation of former industrial centers and the explosive growth of “deaths of despair” among the American working class, including alcohol- and drug-related deaths and suicides.

For years, health outcomes for American workers have been steadily eroding. Life expectancy in the US, the wealthiest nation in the world, has fallen for three years in a row, due primarily to the dramatic increase in deaths of working-age Americans aged 25–64 years, mainly from drug overdoses, alcohol abuse, suicide and organ system diseases.

The fall in life expectancy is by design: the ruling class is deliberately attempting to cut workers’ lives short in order to cut labor costs so that more money can be funneled into the stock markets, the banks and the military budget. Moreover, pharmaceutical companies flooded working class communities devastated by the loss of manufacturing jobs with opioids from 2006–2012 under the Bush and Obama administrations, according to the *Washington Post*.

However, according to the researchers, previous studies which sought to establish a link between social conditions and opioid use had produced mixed results because they used more general indices such as unemployment rates.

“This lack of consensus may reflect the fact that standard economic measures do not adequately capture the fundamental and sustained decline in economic opportunity or the adverse socioeconomic and cultural climate that follows” plant closures, the authors write.

The researchers decided to focus on auto assembly plants because such closures “are often unexpected (to workers), discrete, and both culturally and economically significant events.” Moreover, the authors argue, “automotive plant closures have long been viewed as exemplars of the broader, gradual decline in US manufacturing that has occurred during the last [two] decades.” In other words, the dramatic decline in the social conditions of autoworkers is only the most striking aspect of the decline among the American working class as a whole.

The study examined public health records from 1999–2016 and used death certificate data to calculate the number of opioid deaths by county in the US. The researchers focused on the largest commuting areas with auto plants in operation during that time period, then compiled a database of all auto plants in the US and indicated the date of closure, if they closed.

The study sample focused only on the 112 US counties in commuter zones with the highest proportion of workers employed in manufacturing. Thus, those areas examined were almost exclusively small industrial cities and semi-rural areas throughout the American Midwest and South. Of these, 29 counties in 10 commuting zones were “exposed” to factory closures.

Researchers found that prior to plant closures, baseline opioid overdose mortality rates in “exposed” counties were actually *lower*, on average, than those in unexposed counties. But only two years after plant closures, according to the authors, mortality rates in these counties

were higher.

Those most affected were non-Hispanic white men, aged 18 to 34 years, who experienced a staggering increase of 20.1 deaths per 100,000 individuals five years after a plant closure. The second-most affected group was non-Hispanic white men aged 35 to 65 years, who experienced an increase of 12.8 deaths per 100,000 individuals. However, virtually every demographic was affected to some degree.

This explodes the reactionary myth of “white privilege,” which is peddled by various Democratic Party-aligned corporate media outlets in order to recenter political attention away from social class towards greatly exaggerated notions of racial divisions. The most aggressive role in promoting race theory has been played by the *New York Times*, whose 1619 Project attempts to recast all of American history as the product of racism, and American society as divided by an unbridgeable racial chasm.

In reality, the entire American working class, whether white, black, Hispanic or any other race or ethnicity, has been devastated by decades of rising social inequality and stagnant or declining wages.

The *Times*, on the other hand, speaks for a privileged layer of executives, financial speculators and well-heeled professionals, both white and black, who view the working class with a combination of contempt and fear. They are terrified in particular of the growing wave of strikes and working-class protests extending throughout the country, including many of the states included in this study, and internationally. This includes the General Motors strike last year, in which opposition to plant closures was a key issue for striking autoworkers.

A major responsibility for the social disaster afflicting former industrial towns lies with the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the other American trade unions. Long transformed into open agents of management, they have worked hand in glove with the companies to sabotage any struggle by workers in defense of their jobs and living standards. Since it joined the Chrysler board of directors in 1979, the UAW has directly collaborated with the companies for decades in the closures of dozens of plants.

The most disorienting and cynical lie employed by the unions is the claim that plant closures in the US are the fault of foreign workers in Latin America and Asia. Opposed to the unification of American workers with their Mexican and Chinese brothers and sisters, the unions pit them against each other by demanding plant closures

take place overseas instead, while arguing that cuts are necessary in order to keep product within the United States. This bankrupt strategy, far from saving a single job, has allowed the auto companies, up to now, to eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs with little organized opposition.

Trumbull County, Ohio, which was included in this study, will now be considered an “exposed” county in future research. That is because it is the home of the now-shuttered Lordstown Assembly Plant, one of four facilities the UAW agreed to close as part of its sellout of the GM strike. The bribed company agents which control the UAW will bear direct responsibility for the social consequences.

Ford assembly workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the crisis responded to the findings of the study with empathy.

“I haven’t even heard of these deaths or their connection to auto plants closing,” one worker from the Chicago area said. “I do know of people who are doing certain drugs to dull the pain of strenuous line work, but even that is sad enough.”

Another worker commented, “Substantial mental health and substance abuse treatment programs are [needed] for all workers. The automotive companies control whose [mental health and substance abuse] claim and job is saved based on the situation. There should be more alternative medical programs to deal with work-related stress rather than turning workers to opioids.”

The study’s authors suggests a national strategy to combat the crisis of opioid deaths in working class communities, including such measures as community-based interventions, providing resources to medical clinicians to “identify and address structural forces that may shape patient health,” and “increasing engagement of community agencies and healthcare systems in addressing key social determinants of health.”

But such measures are impossible within the framework of the capitalist profit system. An expropriation of the wealth of the corporations by the working class is the only way to address the crisis of job losses, lack of funding for social programs and “deaths of despair” in the US and worldwide.



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