

Report finds decline in the well-being of American Millennial women when compared to previous generation

Alex Findijs
15 December 2023

A recent report by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) found that young women in the United States are experiencing a decline in well-being when compared to the previous generation. The report, titled “Losing More Ground: Revisiting Young Women’s Well-Being Across Generations,” expanded on research from 2017 that found that social progress for Millennial women was stalling in comparison to Generation X.

According to the report’s metrics for social well-being, Millennials (born between 1981 and 1999), have seen a six percent decline in overall well-being in comparison to their parents in Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980). In 2017 the decline had only been one percent, demonstrating the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. The PRB used a series of metrics to rate well-being, using Gen X as a base of 100 points.

A number of key metrics stand out as worrying indicators of the decline in the health and safety of young women.

Increases in suicides and homicides

There has been a rapid increase in the suicide rate for young women in recent years. When Gen X was aged 25-34, suicide rates for women were at a low of 4.4 per 100,000 people. By 2017 the figure for Millennial women had risen to 6.3 and by 2023 that number is now 7 per 100,000. This rise in suicide rates is connected to socio-economic factors, such as high rates of loneliness, depression, and stress. The report notes that two-thirds of young women report feeling overwhelmed with stress most days.

The overturning of the constitutional right to abortion by the Supreme Court, leading to bans in multiple states, likely also plays a role. Nearly 20 percent of post-natal and maternal deaths are attributed to suicide.

Suicide rates for white women declined somewhat between 2018 and 2021 from 9.5 per 100,000 to 8.5. Meanwhile, rates for non-white populations have risen by similar amounts. Black

women saw an increase from 4.9 to 5.7, Hispanic women from 5.1 to 5.4, and people who reported multiple races from 5.8 to 6.4. By far the most impacted group is Native American and Alaska Native women, with an increase from 23 to 26.9 per 100,000.

Millennial women are not just harming themselves at increased rates, homicide rates have also increased substantially. Unlike suicide rates, homicides were declining as late as 2017 but saw a significant increase during the pandemic along with increased rates of domestic violence. The homicide rate overall for young women was 3.3 per 100,000 in 2017, rising to 4.5 by 2023. Black and Native American populations face considerably higher homicide rates than their white, Hispanic, and Asian peers. The homicide rate for black women is 14 per 100,000 and 11 for Native American women, while the homicide rates for white, Hispanic and Asian Millennials are 4, 3 and 1 per 100,000 respectively.

Homicide has even become a leading cause of death for pregnant and post-natal women. According to research from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, homicides of pregnant and post-natal women exceeded the three main medical causes of maternal mortality (hypertensive disorders, hemorrhage and sepsis).

Highest maternal mortality rate in 90 years

This figure is in the context of rising maternal death rates over the past two generations. Maternal death rates saw their lowest point in history during the Baby Boomer generation, at 7.5 per 100,000 births. By 2017 that number had risen to 19.2 and during the pandemic rose to 30.4, higher than during the Silent Generation (born 1928 to 1945).

COVID-19 played a significant role in this most recent spike, being involved in every one-in-four maternal deaths. As states and congressional Republicans move to implement full bans on abortion, maternal mortality will only increase further. A full

ban on abortion nationwide is expected to increase maternal mortality by 20 percent.

A number of preventable medical issues make up the bulk of maternal deaths. Hemorrhage accounts for 14 percent, cardiac and coronary issues 13 percent, infection, thrombotic embolism and cardiomyopathy each 9 percent, and hypertension 7 percent. The leading cause of death, however, is not a physical ailment but a mental health crisis among pregnant women and new mothers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), mental health related causes of death like suicide and overdose are the leading contributors to maternal mortality, at 23 percent of deaths.

Different factors are leading causes of death when women are divided by race and ethnicity. Mental health is the leading cause for white and Hispanic women, while cardiac and coronary issues were the leading cause for black women and hemorrhage was the leading cause for Asian women. Women in Alaska Native and Native American communities see mental health conditions and hemorrhage account for 50 percent of maternal deaths combined.

The rate of maternal mortality for black women is twice the national average. A wide array of factors contribute to this, including community health risks, improper health care in majority African American areas, and racial discrimination. Black women have higher rates than average of pre-existing health risks and perinatal complications that can contribute to maternal mortality.

One study published in the *World Journal of Gynecology & Women's Health* found that 75 percent of black births occurred at hospitals with a high delivery rate for black mothers. These "black serving hospitals" are more likely to be "located in an urban area, located in the South, be a teaching hospital, have a higher delivery volume, have larger bed size, and have a higher proportion of Medicaid deliveries," and had higher rates of maternal mortality than hospitals with a lower proportion of black mothers.

The researchers concluded that existing comorbidities and location of delivery play a significant role in maternal health risks. While black mothers have higher risk across the board, white mothers had increased risk at the same hospitals as their black peers, suggesting that location and quality of care is a major contributor to increased maternal deaths for women of all races.

Historical indicators of well-being hide deep class inequalities

The PRB report notes the decline in the health and safety of young women is paired with an increase in well-being through other metrics. Millennial women are more likely to have a

college education, be in higher paying professional careers, have lower incarceration rates, and make more than previous generations of women at their age. The gender wage gap for all women is reported at around 80 percent but for Millennial women that number is closer to 90 percent. These are important metrics that show that key indicators of social well-being are no longer guarantees of increased health and safety, nor are they reflective of the well-being of that group as a whole.

What is missing from this analysis is any attempt to break this data down by class. The report spends a considerable amount of time examining the data by race and ethnicity, but makes no effort to explore how these trends affect women of different social classes amid record levels of social inequality.

Regardless of what is missing from the data, the findings in the PRB report are a stark indication of the assault on working-class living standards in the United States, especially during the pandemic. These impacted women in a particularly harsh way, as businesses were shut down for in-person service or forced their workers to labor in unsafe conditions. Now that pandemic-era financial supports, such as expanded funding for food programs and child tax credits, are gone, many women are facing a new wave of economic and social pressures. This is especially true for single mothers and families where the mother is the primary income earner.

During a webinar on the findings of the report, Cata Brumfield, Associate Director at the Georgetown Center on Poverty, noted that "Poverty is a policy choice." This rings true beyond the narrow definition of poverty in the United States, but speaks more broadly to failure of the capitalist system as a whole.

The rapid decline in the well-being of young women, and all workers more broadly, is the product of policies pursued by both the Democrats and Republicans to suppress wage growth, increase unemployment, and force the working class to pay for profits of Wall Street and the funding of imperialist war and genocide around the world. The question before the working class is not policy reform, but socialist revolution to transform society to meet the needs of all, rather than the profit interests of a few.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact